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**SINGLE MOTHERS LIVING IN A SMALL NORTHERN COMMUNITY:  
THEIR STORIES AND THEIR EXPERIENCES**

by

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### **Abstract**

This study acknowledges the stories and experiences of five single mothers living in a small rural community in northern British Columbia. Single motherhood was explored through the use of narrative inquiry in order to gain a subjective understanding that expressed each mother's trials and tribulations, efforts and accomplishments, joys and sorrows. The study identifies and explores six common themes present across the mother's narratives. These themes are new single motherhood, social support, finances, mental health, legal issues and the joy of motherhood. This study may be of interest to single parents, social services, counsellors, medical practitioners and community program decision makers.

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### **Acknowledgements/Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my daughter Andrea, whose courage as a single mother is always a source of inspiration and pride to me. Also to the five amazing single mothers who bravely shared their stories and their lives to make this paper possible.

I also wish to give a heartfelt thank you to my husband Brian (my rock), my son Colin (my sounding board), my friend Cindy D. (my cheerleader), and to Dr. John Sherry (my champion), to Dr. Sylvia Bell (my diligent committee member) and to my inspirational and fearless supervisor Dr. Linda O'Neill who gave me the support, the confidence and the freedom to make this project my own, you are the very best!

## Chapter One - Introduction

Single mothers have existed throughout history. They have raised their children in a wide variety of situations and conditions. Maddalena (2013) asserts that, “female-headed households have always been the most vulnerable of families due to their susceptibility to poverty” (p. 150). Single mothers were often considered a financial drain on their families as well as on society. In bygone times single mothers were a very small and unique segment of society but today they have increased substantially in numbers and acceptance.

In the past, widowed, abandoned or unmarried women with children struggled in society. They were seen as an oddity or an anomaly to be pitied, shunned or avoided. Now single mother families are a significant and accepted segment of households today. There has been a decided increase in single mother households in Canada since the 1960s. “Female lone parents have increased from 7.4% to 12.7% of all families in the 30 year period between 1971 and 2001” (Roberts, Clifton, Ferguson, Kampen & Langlois, 2005, p. 147). Today 13% of Canadian society is made up of lone or single mothers. A lone-mother is a single, divorced, separated or widowed woman who cares for her children without assistance from a spouse or common-law partner in her place of residence (Statistics Canada, 2007). Now single moms have reached such increased numbers that they have ‘common place’ status as well as widespread acceptance in today’s society.

“Mothers – especially single mothers – are heroic in their efforts to raise our nation’s children...” (Bayh, 2003, p. 20). However, their lives as single mothers remain

distinctive when compared with two parent families. Single mothers often have the greatest percent of the responsibility for the welfare of their children (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006).

As in history, all single mothers cope within a variety of different circumstances and challenges unique unto themselves. Current information and data regarding the circumstances and challenges that single mothers face has been collected from many different cultures and countries (e.g. Bakker & Karsten, 2013; Chen, Gu, Chen, 2012; Hong & Welch, 2012). Most of the research participants were from large urban populations. The research focus has concentrated heavily on issues such as welfare, education and mental health regarding single mothers in large cities (e.g. Katz, 2013; Turney, 2012). There is some data reporting on single women in Canada regarding the issues listed above; however there is insubstantial and very limited information on the lives of single mothers in smaller, northern communities and towns.

### **Significance of the Study**

In British Columbia, single mothers make up 80% percent of the lone-parent population with a large portion consisting of Aboriginal women. The Aboriginal single mother population post colonization in Canada is more than double the non-Aboriginal population at 31% compared to 13% (Statistics Canada, 2006). In British Columbia Aboriginal people make up roughly 5% of the total population of the province. Forty percent of the BC Aboriginal population lives in rural, remote and isolated communities or on reserves (BC Vital Statistics, 2001). The Northern Health Authority has the highest percentage of Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia at 15.6% (First Nations Regional

Longitudinal Health Survey (RHS), 2002/2003). Although the research above indicates there is a large single mother population amongst the Aboriginal populace in the north; the scope of this study included only one mother who identified herself as solely of Aboriginal heritage.

Research suggests that single mothers are considerably more vulnerable to a variety of stresses than partnered mothers. They are considered at a much higher risk for possible mental health issues and in specific surveys, rate themselves lower on scales of well-being (National Population Health Survey, 1994/95 and 1996/97). Research suggests that they are also more likely to experience stress due to lack of time and support. Lone mothers suffer higher rates of chronic illness, sick days and activity restrictions than mothers with partners; and single mothers are three times more likely to seek care from medical professions regarding their mental and emotional health (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). Single mothers are significantly more likely to live in poverty and are considered to be as a group one of the poorest family groups living in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008). They make-up 32% of lower income families compared to the 8% held by two parent families (Galarneau, 2005). Crosier, Butterworth and Rodgers (2007) concluded that lone mothers were significantly more likely to encounter mental health issues than their partnered counterparts and the single most influential factors were the “presence of financial hardship in particular as well as perceived lack of social support” (p. 6).

Social support is a crucial component in the lives of single mothers. In a study from a disadvantaged urban area in the United Kingdom, researchers found that social support can protect against the negative and harmful effects of stress. In this study Harris and his



colleagues found women who were supported by a “befriending program” had significantly improved rates of remission from depression (Harris et al., 1999 as cited in Crosier et al., 2007, p. 7). Single mothers living in a small rural northern community have different access to social support than their urban counterparts. Their social ‘safety net’ could be provided by their community or extended family as well as government services or national programs (Mason, 2003).

In researching information on single mothers I found a plethora of information (over 3,000 articles in the database) but none specific to single mothers living in small rural Canadian communities and particularly none in the north of British Columbia. For single mothers there are many differences between living in a small rural northern town and a large urban area. While there is an abundance of data about urban single mothers (e.g. Katz, 2013; Turney, 2012); what is lacking is any information on their counterparts in small rural communities in Northern British Columbia.

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to acquire information and understanding regarding the lives of individual single mothers living in a small town in rural northern British Columbia. This study is twofold in its scope: (1) to gain knowledge and understanding of the experiences of single mothers living in a small rural town; and (2) to discover the positive and negative aspects of single motherhood in the North. The study explored the lives of five northern mothers and their experiences as single parents.

The main research question was: *What is your experience as a single mother living in a small northern town?* The secondary question was: *What have been the positive and*

*negative aspects for you living as single parent in a rural northern community?* Various interview questions were used to access more information at a deeper level on a “need to use” basis.

Information regarding these single mothers in the North may be beneficial to community agencies that provide services but may especially be useful to the women themselves. Social and personal ‘safety nets’ are particularly important to lone mothers and Radey and Brewster (2013) suggest that “social supports for single mothers in times of crisis are widely recognized” (p.397) as an important need. The information in this study could identify to other single mothers that they are not alone in their experience; that possibly there are other single mothers undergoing similar circumstances and situations. This same information may now facilitate an opportunity to bring together other single mothers with the hope of forming a connection, providing support or lending an understanding ear to listen to other lone mothers experiencing small town life in a rural community.

### **The Personal Meaning of this Study**

My interest in the lives of single mothers living in small communities in the north began when my daughter became a single mother over five years ago. My daughter became a single mother when her husband sustained a serious head injury and could no longer live with the family. Her father and I became her main support after she lost any assistance from her husband. We helped our daughter financially, emotionally, with child care and household maintenance. My daughter returned full time to work as a veterinarian technician to support herself and her two young boys. Her job provided just

enough income to survive but not enough to address the accumulated debt incurred before her husband left. She has suffered from moderate depression and mild PTSD since that time. My daughter and I have had many discussions contemplating how she would have survived without the extensive support from her family, her friends and her supportive rural farming community.

While I myself have never been a single mother, I have witnessed many single mothers and their children during the twenty-five years I have taught school in my small northern community. Many of these single mother families have been an inspiration; displaying strong emotional connections and exceptional coping skills, all the while navigating their daily routines. My heart went out to many single moms as they tried single-handedly to meet the duties and responsibilities of two parents with limited resources and support. I have observed single mothers from many walks of life, from many economic circumstances, from different cultural backgrounds and social positions and I found them to have a variety of differences in their situations as well as many commonalities.

One of the most common similarities between the single mothers I have worked with was their deep concern for their children's well-being. How those mothers provided for their children under a variety of circumstances in this small community piqued my curiosity and my interest. I wanted to hear their personal stories of single motherhood; all of the challenges and all of the rewards. I wanted to acknowledge their efforts and accomplishments as well as document their trials and tribulations.

I believe people can create connection and understanding when they reveal their personal journeys and when their voices are heard by others. I also believe when other people can comprehend and appreciate what another person is going through in their life they are more willing to help, support and encourage one another. This collaboration is made easier when they have a basis for a common understanding.

I am hopeful that this study will allow lone mothers to connect and support each other in making their lives in small communities richer and easier. It is my hope that the process of single mothers sharing their stories will encourage them, inspire others to reach out and encourage the community and other individuals to support single mothers in their efforts to raise their children. I hope this leads to those community members becoming more understanding of the challenging parenting role that single mothers face on a daily basis. There is an old African proverb that says, “It takes a whole village to raise a child” (anonymous). I hope that small northern rural “villages” step up when they hear the stories of these single mothers and offer their understanding, their empathy, their admiration, their encouragement and especially their support.

Finally, as a private counsellor in a small community I hope to facilitate the opportunity for single mothers to come together in my town. I believe there is both strength and support in connecting with others who have had similar experiences. I believe single mothers coming together in a support group, in an information workshop or as a social gathering will benefit the single mothers and their children.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The statistics available regarding single mothers in British Columbia do provide a 'vague' idea of the numbers of lone moms potentially living in small northern towns. However, they do not tell their stories and they do not enlighten us to their lived experiences. In order to truly understand the issues concerning single mothers in small rural northern communities, the stories of those mothers, in their own voices, can best inform us of their wishes and their needs. A qualitative research approach was used to gather this information; specifically a narrative inquiry approach was the method used to gain subjective understanding of the experiences of single mothers. I believe in the value of the single mothers' personal perception to inform others of a lived experience. Mayan (2009) states, "Stories and storytelling make meaning in our lives" and through narrative inquiry a story is told by the researcher of the participant's story (p. 49).

I believe as a counsellor and experienced teacher that telling stories and connecting experiences in relationship with others creates our perceived reality. Gergen (1999) states that, "In a broader sense, we may say that as we communicate with each other we construct the world in which we live" (p. 4). This social constructionist view is the one I most closely identify with in my role as a qualitative researcher and as a counsellor. There also exists a guiding feminist perspective given that all of the participants including myself as a researcher were female.

Using a feminist lens suggests a more interpersonal relationship between the single mothers and the researcher. Bloom (1998) says "feminist methodology seeks to break down barriers that exist among women as well as the barriers that exist between the

researcher and the researched” (p. 1). With barriers removed and relationships developed, the single mothers become ‘the experts’ in their own interviews, imparting information and guiding the conversations in a similar format found in feminist phenomenological interviews (Bloom, 1998).

### **Parameters of the Study**

Qualitative researchers can be likened to “explorers ...with the goal of discovering the depth and breadth of human experience” (Mayan, 2009, p.12). In order to allow time to focus on the depth and breadth of each participant’s story, only a small number of single mothers were recruited for this study. In the study the participants were limited to women residing in a small rural northern community willing share their personal experiences as single mothers. I was able to recruit my research subjects from both an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal demographic as well as from a variety of socio-economic and/or educational backgrounds.

My ability to recruit single mothers and form a trusting relationship with them impacted the research findings (Morse, Niehaus et al., 2008 as cited in Mayan, 2009). The quality of the findings was also affected by my ability to collaborate during the interview with the participants in the narrative inquiry process. The data was also affected by the willingness and ability of the participants to tell their stories (Mayan, 2009). The single mother participants determined the depth and the breadth of the information they were willing to share. I met with each participant at least twice. The first meeting consisted of an original interview. The second meeting was an opportunity for the participant to check over the collected narrative transcript to confirm that the

essence of their story and the significant details had been correctly recorded. The participants in this study maintained control over what information was used for research purposes.

### **Summary**

My intention was to illuminate the experiences and the lives of single mothers of small communities in the North by giving their voices a chance to be heard. I saw when given this opportunity single mothers let us know their needs, their wants and their wishes. I hope that the information will identify what needs could be supported, what wants could be facilitated and what wishes could be granted through a connection with each other and with the community. My personal motivation concerning this study was my desire for information regarding single mothers in my own community so that as a counsellor I can support their well-being and facilitate their connection to services which in turn may help sustain them in raising their children.

## Chapter Two – Literature Review

Single mothers and lone mother parenting has been studied by many researchers and their issues have been the topic of many publications. Much of the focus of those studies is based on single mothers in the welfare system or mothers using social assistance in its various forms. There is also statistical information on single mother health, education and socio-economic status. While a significant number of the studies were based in the United States regarding single black mothers living in urban areas (e.g. Mendenhall, Bowman & Zhang, 2013; Robinson & Werblow, 2012), there was also a substantial amount of studies globally on single mothers ranging from a study on resilience in single Taiwanese mothers (Hong & Welch, 2012) to low income single mothers in China (Chen, Gu, Chen, 2012). Most of the studies focussed on one specific issue such as mental health, financial hardship, social support deficits or poor educational or job opportunities for lone mothers. These issues likely concern most single mothers in one capacity or another; however I found a lack of any specific information regarding single mothers raising their children in small, rural communities in the North. The geographical context of northern BC, the social composition of a small community and the relative isolation of a rural town may present uniquely challenging issues for the single moms living in that environment. I believe those living as single mothers in that location will truly know the challenges and rewards involved and that their voices would be an important source of information in understanding their needs and their wants specific to their environment.

Chapter two explores the issues single mothers face in a variety of environments and situations. I reviewed the statistics regarding single mothers in Canada and British



Columbia. In the following sections the focus was on four consistent themes or categories of issues found in the literature pertaining to single mothers. The four categories discussed are mental health, financial hardship, social supports and employment and educational opportunities.

### **Mental Health**

Statistics Canada declares that when single or lone mothers are compared to the general population they are three times more likely to seek health care from professionals regarding their mental and emotional health (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). The connection between mental health and family type is well documented in research: single mothers are known to have higher levels of common mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse disorder when compared to their partnered counterparts (e.g. Butterworth, 2004; Wang, 2004). In a longitudinal Australian study the prevalence of moderate to severe mental disability was substantially more prevalent among single mothers (28.7%) as compared with partnered mothers at (15.7%) (Crosier, Butterworth & Rodgers, 2007).

The mental health of single mothers is linked to other factors such as poverty, social support and resources and exposure to various types of trauma. Welfare mothers living below the poverty line and attending school suffered significant mental health issues according to Katz (2013) where she states that these single mothers lead very “stressful and fragile lives” and one such woman revealed, “I suffer from extreme anxiety and depression...which kicked in after I got on welfare” (p. 283). Women reported increased levels of anxiety and stress when transitioning from welfare to a work-based program

(Herbst, 2012). Social support levels also affect the mental health of single mothers. In a study conducted by Crosier, Butterworth and Rodgers (2006) it was concluded that single mothers were more likely to experience greater levels of poor mental health than partnered mothers and one of the two primary factors associated with this was “the perceived lack of social support” (p. 12). The mental health of a single mother can be further degraded if they have been exposed to one or more incidents of trauma. Single mothers experiencing incidents of trauma have a higher incident of PTSD when compared to their married counterparts. The most vulnerable mothers for PTSD are income-assisted and homeless single mothers (Samuels-Dennis et al., 2010). Therefore, based on the research related above, single mothers are considered more vulnerable and susceptible to mental health disorders and that information could be a significant consideration when used in the design of a support or social group.

### **Financial Hardship**

Single mothers are one of the most impoverished family groups in Canada with 32% of lone mothers considered to be low income when compared to 8% in two parent families and 10% in any other family type (Statistics Canada, 2008). Further statistics relate that there is a ninety-four percent rate of association between single mother status and poor mental health which is strongly affected by financial hardship, household income, socio-demographic and social support (Crosier et al., 2007; Radey & Brewster, 2013). High levels of financial hardship were related with a greater occurrence of moderate to severe mental disability in single mothers and increased psychiatric and academic difficulties in their children (Crosier et al., 2007; Scharte, & Bolte, 2012). Historically households that have been headed by females have always been the most

vulnerable due to their extreme susceptibility to poverty; one of the main factors that contribute to this vulnerability is that they bear heavier economic and emotional responsibilities with less access to financial resources (Maddalena, 2013; Mendenhall et al., 2013). In the study of Sheila Katz (2013) a single mother on welfare and struggling financially speaks of her sleeplessness, headaches and stress over the constant threat of being ‘cut off’ and left without sufficient resources to take care of her children. “I have only been surviving,” says another mother in the same study as she speaks of her and her daughter going hungry until the arrival of her financial aid cheque (Katz, 2013, p. 285). Lone mothers and their children have been the centre of increasing research in which some suggest that “such family arrangements lead to inequality and the reproduction of poverty” (Carlson, 2011 as cited in Turney, 2012, p.7). Financial hardship can be, based on the information above, a substantial and significant influence on single mother’s well-being.

### **Social Support**

“Social connections—who we know and who they know—have value to both the individual and to the community at large” (Johnson & Honnold, 2011, p.12).

Historically, low-income mothers have relied on their extended families and close neighbours for social support as they endeavored to care for their families; often these poor mothers exchanged childcare, small loans, temporary lodging and other forms of emotional support with each other (Johnson & Honnold, 2011; Mendenhall et al., 2012). Today more single mothers are required to be in the workforce full time to make ends meet; [therefore] the time and opportunity to support each other grows more scarce (Bakker & Karsten, 2013).

Single mothers are a vulnerable group that could gain greatly from having a personal 'safety net' (Radey & Brewster, 2013). Social 'safety nets' can be important to all mothers in the long term however single mothers experienced "more rapid deterioration of their perceived safety nets" than did more advantaged partnered mothers (Radey & Brewster, 2013, p. 397). Harris and his colleagues (Harris et al., 1999 as cited in Crosier et al., 2007, p.7) suggest the consequences of not gaining that personal safety net mentioned above could result in a "higher incidence of mental health issues among single mothers" (p.7); he then names a lack of social support as a significant contributing factor to that higher incidence of mental disability (p.7).

Conversely, "the presence of social support can protect against the negative effects of stress and disadvantage" (p.7) and that a study in the United Kingdom found women participating in a 'befriending' social support group achieved significantly higher rates of remission from depression. The research literature presented above indicates the strong importance of having a social support system in place for single mothers. It also suggests that maintaining a social 'safety net' or on-going social connection may be more difficult for single mothers than their partnered counterparts. Interventions that help promote single mothers' sense of personal control by helping to build positive social relationships and reducing negative ones appear central to improved mental health in this population (Samuels-Dennis et al., 2010).

## **Employment and Educational Opportunities**

Single mothers may find they are often overwhelmed and suffer role strain as they try to provide for their family. Lone mothers may suffer ‘provider role strain’ when barriers such as low income, underemployment, joblessness, etc. increase problems for mothers that have financial responsibility for their family (Bowman & Sanders, 1998 as cited in Mendenhall et al., 2013). Bakker and Karsten (2013) suggest that traditionally single mothers experience many constraints when trying to combine work, care and leisure time. One single parent expressed her frustration, “I could not work enough hours because of my pre-school aged children” (Bakker & Karsten, 2013, p. 183). Lone mothers can find themselves ‘on-call’ twenty-four hours per day, responsible for balancing work hours and child care, while keeping their family afloat (Bakker & Karsten, 2013). Those mothers then have to decide if they will sacrifice hours given to caring for their children and themselves for more work hours to improve their financial situation. Single mothers leaving welfare for employment have been found to have gained increased self-esteem on one hand but have lost the time to care for their own children and to engage in investments in well-being such as exercise and education for themselves (Herbst, 2012; Cook, 2012).

Katz (2013) suggests that single mothers must implement “survival strategies to finish their degrees while on welfare” (p. 274). These mothers also practice survival strategies in order to remain on welfare long enough to support their families while giving themselves enough time to complete their studies. In an effort to improve their financial situations single mothers often find that they need at least a bachelor’s degree but to have the time to earn that degree and support their children they need to use the welfare

system (Katz, 2013). One mother emphasized in *Survival Narratives & Strategies for Pursuing Higher Education on Welfare* that “it would be a hell of a lot easier...to find a decent job than to go to school...unfortunately there’s no work out there for someone with my qualifications right now ...so I have to take the long road and have to juggle a delicate balance in my life every day” (Katz, 2013, p. 283). Single mothers attempting to achieve a higher education cite that student financial aid is crucial to their financial survival (Johnson & Honnold, 2011; Katz, 2013).

The experiences of the two single mothers expressed above are just a tiny sample of the difficulties single mothers encounter when trying to improve their financial situations and the welfare of their families through work and/or educational channels.

## **Summary**

I have presented research that suggests single mothers as a group struggle with greater financial hardship, have more mental health disabilities, have a greater need for social support but less personal resources to secure it and have less opportunity to pursue work and educational advancement than partnered mothers. Through the literature review, I explored each of the four main areas that impact single mothers’ lives separately, but in the lives of single mothers there is great overlap between those areas; for example, in the lives of lone mothers, financial hardship may affect their mental health, their mental health may be affected by the perceived levels of social support, their job and educational opportunities may be affected by financial hardship which can in turn affect their mental well-being and so on. This information may be both relevant and important when supports for single mothers are being considered or planned in their community. But

more important was the opportunities to hear single mothers living in small rural northern communities give voice to their experiences from their perspective in their own environment; that information may be invaluable in determining the direction plans should take in building support for single mothers in those communities.

### **Chapter 3 – Research Design**

The research was designed to enable single mothers to share their stories, reflect on their experiences and relate their needs and wants and hopefully, in doing so, enlighten others in their community. The qualitative research design I used was narrative inquiry and I will briefly outline the ‘open-ended’ interview process. I will discuss the ethical concerns specific to working with single mothers living in a small, rural, northern community. This chapter will also summarize the recruitment strategies, the participant criteria and the data collection. Finally, I will outline my process of data analysis.

#### **Research Process/Plan of Inquiry**

The focus of this research was an exploration into the lived experiences of single mothers from small rural towns in Northern British Columbia. I sought to understand the perspectives and viewpoints of the mother’s lives and their involvement in single motherhood. I used an open-ended narrative interview that invited each woman to share her story, her life experiences, her challenges and her rewards as a single mother. Mayan (2009) states that unstructured interview in which a participant shares her story after being asked a ‘grand tour’ question followed by other broad questions is the most common in qualitative research (p. 71). I connected with these single mothers and built a compassionate relationship of trust and collaboration that allowed the mothers both safety and comfort in which to tell their stories and relive their experiences.

I made field notes to record other thoughts, feelings or behaviors noticed during each interview. I also maintained a small reflexive journal to record my thoughts in order to reflect on my understanding and my engagement with the experiences presented by the



single mothers. I was aware of how much I was drawing on and including my own experiences as part of the mother's own stories. I recorded and transcribed each interview to facilitate a thorough analysis of each narrative story. I used theming to analyze the data, to discover overarching themes and to identify key concepts in the stories presented by the study participants. The data findings and final project paper will be shared with each of the participants and prospectively any interested community members or service providers seeking ways in which to support single mothers.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Conducting research with single mothers living in a small town environment presented several ethical concerns. The first and foremost was the maintenance of participant confidentiality and the second addressed the potentiality of a dual relationship arising in our small towns. I have lived in or near the communities I recruited from for over thirty-eight years and knew of several of my participants and/or of their families. In order to protect my participants and their anonymity those in the study were asked to choose a pseudonym and that pseudonym was used exclusively throughout the entire process of theming, transcripts and project paper writing as the only method of identification. Also participants were seen confidentially in my private home office or in their own homes at their request. Moreover, the likelihood of a dual relationship situation was addressed by clearly informing my participants of that potentiality.

Additionally, the town where the participants lived was not identified in the transcripts or in this final project and significant care was also taken to remove any other distinguishable traits of their home community. Furthermore, all documents such as

letters of consent, interview transcripts, reflexive journals, researcher notes were stored under my control in a locked cabinet. All information stored on the computer was locked with my owner code. Finally, all information obtained for this project will be destroyed within five years.

Research identifies single mothers as having a higher risk of mental disorders such as anxiety, depression and PTSD and is therefore potentially a vulnerable population (e.g. Butterworth, 2004; Wang, 2004). The risk for these single mothers participating in this study needed to be outweighed by the potential benefits such as the increased knowledge of their situation potentially leading to a better understanding and greater support from the community (Mayan, 2009). Participants were made clearly aware of the possibility that memories of intense or deep emotional experiences could arise as they shared their accounts of single motherhood. A contact list of local counsellors and/or social workers was made available to all the single mothers involved in the study. Further, in a letter of consent, all participants were made aware of the parameters of the project and its intended outcomes. They were also made cognizant that their participation was entirely voluntary; that they could stop the interview at any time and that they could withdraw from the study at any point.

Similarly, they were made aware that they had control over all of their own information and could choose at any time to withdraw permission to use any or all of the data collected. Participants were given, during a second meeting, the opportunity in which to review their interview transcripts and the chance to make any changes and /or corrections. Each contributor then initialled and signed their transcripts to signify that they approved and accepted the final text.

In conducting interviews with younger single mothers I was aware that as a white, middle class, married mother of two and a retired elementary school teacher, I could be perceived as coming from a position of ‘superior knowledge about raising children or being a good mother’ depending on the background of my research participants. It was my intention to dispel any perceived authority by becoming a co-constructor of their stories within an atmosphere of compassion and understanding as fellow women hopefully sharing and bonding through the common trait of just being mothers living in a small, rural northern community.

### **Participants and Recruitment**

The five participants were selected for this study by advertising in public areas and by word of mouth in various communities. The participants were selected from a group of single mothers living in a small northern community for over a year with children currently under the age of eighteen. I was able to recruit a variety of single mothers who closely represented the diversity of the lone mothers living in northern communities taking into consideration such factors as their cultural background, their socio-economic status and their educational background. Participants in the study were presented with a letter that clearly outlined the parameters and purpose of this project, the expectations of the participants and the researcher and my intention to have the information available to themselves, the community and/or service workers.

As a thank you for the mother’s time and willingness to share their stories they received a gift card. This gift card was given to all participating mothers after the first interview; and given before they chose whether or not to give final permission for any of

their information to be used in this study. The awarding of the gift card was not mentioned in the recruitment of the mothers and was awarded as a thank you after the completion of the initial interview.

### **Data Collection: An Open-ended Interview**

Mayan (2009) suggests that through the “intense study of the experiences of one or more participants, primarily through unstructured interviews, a story is told” and further that “narrative is how stories and storytelling make[s] meaning in our lives” (p. 49). I found that each interview covered slightly more than an hour of time. Each interview time was based on whether each participant believed they had had time to have their ‘say’ or had told their story in such a way as to feel comprehensive and complete to them. I interviewed participants in a confidential environment and audio recorded each interview using two separate devices, a laptop computer and electronic pad. Then I personally transcribed the information from those sources on to my computer at a later time.

The single mothers were asked to share their stories and experiences in an open-ended interview. The main research question was: *What is your experience of being a single mother living in a small northern town?* The secondary question was: *What are the positive and negative aspects of living as a single parent in your community?* Other probing questions were used to access more information at a deeper level on a “need to use” basis. The participants then guided the direction of the interview and any further questions were asked as needed in order to achieve a deeper or broader understanding of their narrative.

Finally, participants had the option to have a second interview in case they needed more time to complete their narrative or if they wished to share other significant information they had recalled since the first interview. None of the participants requested a second interview. The participants reviewed their interview transcriptions and edited their material during a second confidential meeting time. Each mother indicated by initially and signing her transcripts that she was satisfied with the documentation of her narrative.

### **Analysis of the Data/Analysis**

I used the participants' stories to determine the direction of the research and the content of the data collected. I remained open to following both the depth and breadth of their experiences, wherever they led, in order to present the participant's stories authentically and accurately. Mayan (2009) stresses that in order for the researcher to provide valid results the information and conclusions must be provided by the research data. Most often narratives are presented as whole stories but in this study, due to the confidentiality issues present in small community work, the decision was made to do a thematic analysis of the narratives. First I used coding in identifying and making comparisons between the narratives in order to determine important data and significant commonalities between the stories. I coded for specific words and underlined specific passages that were present in each mother's narrative. Then, by organizing the coding information into categories, I used a theming process in order to determine the most salient issues expressed by the five study participants. Importantly, the final themes ultimately chosen reflected what was considered most central in these mothers' stories

and the key themes presented were based on the coding of the significant data collected from the participants' narratives.

### **Validity**

One of the ways to ensure research validity is through researcher responsiveness. Mayan (2009) advises that "the strength of qualitative inquiry comes from the ability of the researcher to be an analytical and critical thinker" (p. 108). In order to have a forum in which to record, analyze and critically think over my reactions, my feelings, my frustrations and my highlights I used a reflexive journal. Mayan (2009) also believes that there needs to be "a methodological coherence" to ensure validity (p. 108). My social constructionist and feminist leanings are coherent with the subject of single mothers and their experiences in a small community. My research question asked participants' to relate their lived experiences as single mothers in their own voices which is consistent with narrative inquiry. Finally, in order to further guarantee research validity, I had my participants review their transcripts, checking with them that the information had been recorded and interpreted correctly and used their feedback to correct any discrepancies or amend any omissions.

### **Reflexivity**

Mayan (2009) asserts that "perhaps the most important strategy...throughout the entire research process is reflexivity" (p. 112). I had formed certain beliefs and biases, which influenced my understanding and my interpretation of the stories presented by the single mothers in the study, based on myself having raised two children, by helping to raise three grandchildren and having been an elementary school teacher for over 25 years.

Therefore it was important that those beliefs and biases were known and recorded in a reflexive journal to ensure my responsiveness as a researcher. Awareness of my subjectivity in the research process helped to identify where I was coming from personally as a researcher and document that influence on my data.

I also needed to be especially sensitive to the cultural diversity and cognizant of the socio-economic status of my participants. I was aware of my white, middle-class, educated background and worked diligently to avoid imposing those values when doing interviews, note taking or when interpreting or analysing the data. I was diligent in checking for understanding and asking for clarification and direction from my participants so that any misunderstanding or misinterpretation was avoided or corrected.

### **Summary**

I believe that the narrative inquiry process of an open-ended interview to be the strongest method in which to gain insightful and enlightening expressions regarding the lived experiences of single mothers in the North. The value of qualitative research promoted the sharing of information that could make a difference beyond the numbers to other single mothers. The voices of single mothers were the source of their authentic experience and are included in the next chapter in order to provide knowledge and awareness to those who can potentially provide support. I hope this study will deliver an avenue which will bring together single mothers and encourage a 'safety net' to form that will support and care for them as they raise their children in their small, rural northern community.

#### **Chapter 4 - Five Stories of Single Motherhood in a Small Northern Community.**

This project focused on the lives of five single mothers living with children under the age of eighteen. These moms were asked to reflect on their lives since becoming single parents. These participant mothers' ages ranged from twenty-five to forty-seven; their children varied in ages from two to fourteen years old. Each mother had only male children living at home with them at the time of the study. One mother had two grown daughters living independently away from her home whereas all the other mothers in this study had only sons. Each mother had extraordinary situations to overcome in their effort to provide safe and healthy surroundings for their sons. These five mothers believed it necessary to separate from their partners or husbands in order to provide the best environment, thus becoming lone parents in the process. Following the introduction "Single Motherhood: Different Journeys – Same Destination" the narratives of their experiences, circumstances, situations and the surrounding players are examined thematically under the headings Social Support, Finances, Mental Health, Legalities and Relationships.

#### **Single Motherhood: Different Journeys - Same Destination**

The five mothers that were interviewed for this study all had different and diverse stories to tell on how they found themselves becoming single parents. All the mothers wanted to relate the beginning of their story; and their narratives were tales of joy and sadness, fear and bravery, challenge and perseverance, heartbreak and acceptance. Some of their pregnancies were planned and wanted while others were complete surprises or as in two situations: near 'miracles'. However, once these children arrived, in all cases with



no exceptions, these mothers began to base their life decisions first and foremost on the protection and nurturing of their children. They have all left or asked their partners or husbands to leave in order to provide a healthier environment for their children. These mothers chose the health, safety and happiness of their children over the relationship with the children's father. Each mother chose a variety of ways to provide the best life for their child; the following is an account of their journeys.

One of the near "miracles of birth" involved Charlie, a quiet thirty seven year old mother to her fifteen year old son. She had her first major operation at age twenty which was two years before the birth of her son. Charlie found herself needing a second operation in 2000 and was told by doctors they were greatly concerned:

...because it was very close to the time I had gotten pregnant...when I went under all the anesthetic...and it causes spina bifida and loss of limb and everything, so you can either take a chance because you can't see that stuff until the baby forms, right?... and carry it to term or you can...so I took a chance and he was perfect. He is amazing...I am so lucky but I knew that when I was pregnant with him I was going to be a single mom before he was even born and I knew it would probably be the only time I was a mom...so I [thought] I am going to enjoy this and you know I honestly have...

Charlie's premonition that she would be a single mother did come true as her son's father was not able to cope with her surgeries before or after the birth of their son:

...yeah I was only twenty at the time and ummm...plus even though I had nobody saying anything was wrong, so basically every surgery I went through with my son's dad, as soon as he got back [with me] he was like you have got to go; this is too much to take on...and I had to move out.

Charlie wasn't the only mom that found her partner and the father of her son unsupportive and unwilling to take on the responsibility of a father. Clover, the youngest mom in the study, is an earnest caretaker of her energetic two-year old son. Clover describes herself as an introvert and was concerned before the interview that she wouldn't talk enough or produce enough useable information, so she wrote two pages of her thoughts down before she even arrived. In the post interview she joked that she couldn't believe how much she had talked and guessed [correctly] that she had probably talked more than any of the other mothers in the study! Clover's thoughts began with how she had become a single mom...

...before our son was conceived his dad and I were two very lost wandering souls with no real purpose or sense of direction. Our lives mostly revolved around partying...when I found out I was pregnant at first I was shocked as it wasn't planned and I had only been with this guy for one month....

Clover changed her life right away once she discovered she was expecting. She found that the "chaos and drama" that had been so much a part of her life faded away. She quit smoking and drinking. Clover found partying became a thing of the past. However, she found that her partner was not changing his habits or lifestyle before the birth of their son:

...unfortunately his dad did not change and I honestly didn't notice the severity of his drug addiction until I became pregnant and my mind was out of that foggy place...I felt alone because the person I created this child with was in his own world, an altered world separate from the pregnancy...I hated the thought of our baby coming from a broken home...I held on to a glimmer of hope that once his dad physically seen him it would become real and he would decide to change...

But her baby's father did not change after the birth of their son:

...his dad seemed unaffected by our son's birth...he really didn't want to hold him...we all lived together but there was a huge disconnect...I finally gave his dad an ultimatum I told him he needed to stop partying and lying and if he didn't change, our son and I would leave... nothing changed so when our son was about two months old I decided that I would rather that my son came from a broken home than an unhealthy dysfunctional one ...our son deserves better than that...and I had no other choice than to move in with my parents.

Clover finds it hard not to have her son's dad in his life but believes she does need to protect her son from his dad if he has been drinking or doing drugs. Her son's father has moved away but still calls to talk to him occasionally on the phone:

...his dad phones about once a week and sometimes he phones intoxicated and wants to talk to our son but of course I refuse and say you can't talk to him...you can talk to him when you are sober...there were times when he would make me feel guilty and say that I didn't give him a chance to be a dad but I know that it is the disease talking and that he is not capable of taking care of a child because drugs has a hold of his soul.

Charlie and Clover weren't the only mothers in the study that were separated from their partners soon after the birth of their sons. The circumstances were different for thirty-seven year old Denalda but she also found herself a single mother living with her parents soon after the birth of her son. Denalda had been married for just over a decade and originally "didn't want to be a mom but decided to try because my husband wanted kids" and as a result had been attempting for two years to become pregnant. She felt at that time something was wrong in the relationship and had reconsidered becoming pregnant.

Denalda decided to go back on birth control and:

...I am waiting and waiting for my period and it doesn't come so I say OMG so I went to the doctor and he, which is a funny start to my story, he went into the bathroom and there were two cups of pee and he tested the wrong cup and he came back and told me I wasn't pregnant....but I am like "I peed on one of those sticks and it said I was pregnant"...we'll do blood work [on Friday] ...so I waited all weekend and the doctor was busy...there was a lady that worked there and I will always remember her face...I am like "Can you just tell me if I am pregnant?"...She is like "You are pregnant"...and I just started crying.

Denalda laughed during the interview because she figured only in a small town, where you know the receptionist, could you talk her into telling you confidential information in the medical clinic lobby without the doctor's permission. Denalda also finds out that she was correct in her sense that there was "something wrong" in her relationship with her husband:

...then the nine months and clearly prior to that my husband was having an affair I asked him over and over again is there anything going on...so four days before my son was born he [husband] up and leaves...finally he tells me...so I did what a pregnant woman did, I tried to chase her [husband's girlfriend] down with a stick ...it didn't work out so well but she ran. (laughter)...So for four days I did nothing but cry...and I am not a 'cry-ee' person but when you are pregnant you can't control that stuff...and I had to go to the hospital because I got dehydrated...

So Denalda traveled to her doctor away in the next largest town and had been "split up" from her husband for only four days when the doctor informs her she is in labour:

...So I phone him [husband]..."I am having this baby do you want to be here for it?"...so I let him be here ...but sadly the day after I had my son he told me he never wanted him, he actually said, "you wanted him more than I did"...So I knew at that point it was just me and my boy...and you have all these visions of

toddlers running down the hallway and dad chasing them, thinking of a life that's [now poof] gone.

Denalda had been living at her home she had shared with her husband before the pregnancy but her parents moved her in with them after the birth of her son. She allowed her son's father to come to see her son:

"...for the first two years he did nothing but drink ...he would come with alcohol on his breath...I let him come to the house whenever he wanted, he just wasn't allowed to take him [my son] away from the house...he has taken himself out of my son's life all by himself...he has made it his choice not to be involved in my son's life...I am not responsible for that...I left the ball in his court when it came to that [connection with his son].

Helen is the oldest mom in the study at forty- seven years old and is the only identified Aboriginal in this study. She has three children in total with her estranged husband, two daughters who are grown and out of the home and her young son who is three and half. Helen and her husband had been separated for many years when they re-connected and she became pregnant with their son:

...I always used to think, my daughter probably thinks I am such a dumb ass, cause I have gone back to her father like so many times, even though he leaves for alcohol, I will take him back...cause I always used to think that my family is supposed to be together... [now he is gone] my family *is* [emphasis added] together, what family I am supposed to be with *is here* [emphasis added]...  
...yes when he gets drunk he is really bad unfortunately...my door is always locked, that's one thing I always make sure is my door is always locked ...I am scared... he can't get into my building anymore...now they have a lock on there they keep the fire door at the back locked too....

Helen has lived in her current apartment with her son for almost two years and does not allow her son's father to visit because of his alcoholism. She does allow him to talk on the phone when he is sober and able to converse with his son rationally.

Anna also understands what it is like to fear her sons' father and leave her marriage and become a single mom in order to provide a safer and healthier environment for her two boys. Anna lived out of town with her husband until she left just over a year ago and moved into a tiny two bedroom home which she was able to purchase in a small community. Anna, a thirty year old mother left with:

...I really didn't take anything I just took some clothes and the kids and it was just survival mode. And I disappeared; I didn't go to work, the kids were on a break but we really just hid out...my ex wasn't really in a mental state to deal with that stuff...he had gone through a lot of trauma with his family and he was taking it out on us and we were scared of him...

Anna ended up returning to her home after four or five months because of pressure from her friend, the woman she was staying with, to return to her husband:

...I was still in survival mode, I wasn't in a state of how things would be better for me in the future, I was just treading water...I was still there [just coping]...then my ex started drinking...and he had a few of his tantrums and said some really awful things and nothing new or anything like that but I was like "alright we are going back to how it was" [before she left the first time], I was just waiting for it...and my hope was gone...I knew his violence was just going to become physical again...there was a year of preparation for me to get out...it was a long time to be in that situation and pretend...

Unlike all of the other single mothers in this study who have physical custody and guardianship (if not yet legal custody over their sons), Anna does not. Anna's sons live

with her during their school days but their father has custody every other weekend. So unlike her counterparts in this study she is not able to monitor or sensor what her sons are exposed to when visiting with their dad, which causes great anguish for Anna.

### **Summary**

Each lone mother arrived at single parenthood in a different way. Whether the pregnancy was planned or unplanned each mother began with hopes that their children's father would help provide a stable, secure and loving family in which to raise their children. For all the mothers in this study this was not to be the case; their circumstances required them alone to provide for the healthy upbringing of their children. Their children's welfare became their responsibility. Their children depend on them to provide an environment that nurtures and cares for them as they grow and develop. Each of these single mothers has accepted the challenge to give the best of themselves to their children.

### **Social Support: The Safety Net of Family, Friends and Social Services**

All the mothers in this study from the youngest to the oldest needed social support in order to create a safe environment and stable home for their young sons. Some mothers currently live with family such as Denalda who has resided with her parents since her son's birth. Other mothers, such as Clover and Helen, have spent time with family until they gained their footing and moved on to their own apartments after receiving social assistance. Correspondingly, Charlie and Anna moved on to their own houses using whatever personal resources they could draw on to give their sons a place to call home.

While each of these single mother's stories are substantially different, what they do all have in common is a need for a variety of social supports while creating and maintaining

their single family households. Family, friends and government services have provided counselling, financial means, transportation, accommodations and child care. Friends, family and community services have also provided crucial emotional support for these single moms. Some mothers have found social services to be a consistent and useful support while others have been disappointed by a lack of available and reliable funding. While family and friends offered support in many areas; several of the mothers mentioned a concern that they did not want to be a burden to family members or friends. Other mothers found that just having “the knowing” that if ever truly in need, whatever support necessary would be freely given by close family members and/or friends. This support has allowed these mothers to successfully provide stable single parent families for their children.

The decision to live with her parents began when Denalda’s mother and father moved her from her marital home and in with them before she had even left the hospital:

...when I got out my mom and dad had taken all my baby stuff and whatever and moved it into their house...they were like “No, you are living with us”. When I got out of the hospital they brought him home to the home he is in now.

Clover was also welcomed with the open arms of her parents as she left the dysfunctional situation with her partner two months after her boy was born. Clover was able to leave an unhealthy situation because she knew she would be supported by her parents:

...Mom and dad were just beyond...they were so happy and they right away just like, “Anything you need...we are here, we understand ...



Clover was so very thankful because her parents were so welcoming and supportive because she knew of a lot of single mothers that don't "have that option and have to really struggle to do all their own things".

Charlie was one of those moms who struggled on her own to make a home for her son after his father moved them. She says:

...yeah when my son was three...we moved down to [a new town] and like I said I didn't know anyone, I didn't have babysitters...everyone I knew was ten hours away right?

So Charlie moved into the same apartment building with a teenaged girl that could babysit her young son and be at her "beck and call". She paid for her own apartment and the apartment of her babysitter so that the sitter was consistently there and available to care for three year old son.

Helen also needed to find her own apartment after she ended up in a women's shelter in her small community. Helen had moved to the community she now lives in after coming to visit and then losing the accommodations where she had been staying previously in Alberta. She and her young son stayed for months with family, her niece and nephew, in the living room of a small two bedroom townhouse until conflict with her three and a half year old grandniece forced her to leave. Helen comments that:

...I phoned her myself (the safe house) and said, "I am so stressed out", ...plus we didn't have our own space, we slept in the living room, we didn't have our own...that's really hard because you can't leave your clothes...we lived out of our bag for three or four months.

Helen was able to receive social assistance and has acquired a two bedroom apartment in town. In the same apartment building complex Clover rents a small one bedroom

apartment. Shortly after moving in with her parents, after gaining confidence and feeling better about herself, she began the process of applying for welfare because she thought:

...I think with not having a support system there is a struggle but also with a support system there is a different struggle of feeling like a burden and like guilt and all those kind of feelings.

While both Helen and Clover used social services to fund apartments for themselves, Charlie was able to qualify for subsidized housing in her community. She was able to move into a two bedroom townhouse. Her rent is based on her income and allows her to have a larger space at a fraction of what Helen and Clover must pay for an apartment. The oil and gas industry in the north has caused rents to be greatly increased making it very expensive to currently live in northern British Columbia. The oil and gas industry has also raised house prices considerably and Anna found it difficult to find a home she could afford on her modest income. Anna looked at several rental properties before deciding to purchase a home:

...well after looking to rent and looking at my options between two larger towns and my job being here, just up the hill, my job is there... I knew that for me to keep my cost down I have to live close to my work to keep down my driving costs and time wise with the kids...ummm anyway I couldn't find anywhere to live, I started looking at places to buy, [because] there was just nowhere to rent unless you had a lot of money, right?...it [rent] could be between \$1700 and \$2000 if I wanted a three bedroom...I did look at a four-plex... it was like, a two bedroom place and it was still \$1200 per month and it was like filthy and gross and it wasn't great... like the windows don't even open...I couldn't say "Oh kids this is where we are living".

Fortunately, Anna received support from a woman real estate agent sympathetic to her situation that helped her find a home that was being rented while the owners were trying

to sell. Anna was warned by an appraiser not to buy her current home because of the many defects and serious flaws in its structure. Anna asked him if the “house was going to kill her or her kids in the next ten years” and when the appraiser said “No” she purchased the affordable house.

Before the purchase of her own home Anna had the support of two counsellors that helped her form a safe plan to leave her abusive situation with her husband. Anna was already seeing a counsellor with her husband for marriage counselling but that counsellor also helped her:

.... I knew I was leaving and my counsellor knew I was leaving , we worked really, really hard at getting out safely...she worked me through like what I could do to get a place, there was a year of preparation for me to get out.

Anna also had support in her situation when she worked with a counsellor from a government agency in a larger center. The counsellor, a lady who usually dealt with women who were very high, high risk, did the best she could for Anna. She gave her some safety tips on basically how to “get out safely and don’t rock the boat, don’t start an argument”. Anna found the emotional support and validation she gained from that counsellor gave her the strength she needed to leave the abusive situation with her husband:

“ I don’t know if it was support, it was more like validation of what was going on, like my mom was super supportive of me and she was like “[I] seen it from a mile away” but I never really told her because ...I don’t know...I don’t know if it is kind of weird...because you don’t say things because you already know what the answer will be and you are not ready to hear [it], or don’t want to hear it or defend why did it...whatever the reasons they were.... The government agency ...said they could put me in a house, like a safe house and they were

willing to do that...it was kind of temporary and for my kids to be there and they don't know what the hell is going on...I am like I can't do this, this is not realistic, like just don't work, I couldn't...it didn't line up at all for me to still pay the bills and keep my kids... [at the safe house].

Anna's reluctance to share her problems with her mother paralleled the situation Helen experienced with her middle daughter. Helen believed her daughter just thought of her as "Oh she is just mom, kind of thing" and a 'stupid' mom for repetitively returning to her alcoholic husband many times in the past. However, a niece told Helen that that daughter said:

...that you are her hero...I was like "What?"...how can I be a hero I don't do anything...she said, "Well, you are a strong women"...she thinks I am a strong women? ...and I always just thought I was just a mom.

Helen found this type of emotional support from her daughter made her feel "like wow, right on, I felt really good". And emotional support is not all Helen has received from her middle daughter. She says she is always able to count on her daughter's help for everything:

...she helps me a lot, if I am short on groceries or something she will...I will say "I am broke" and she will say "Well I can give you fifty for groceries you know, yeah".

Helen knows that she has a lot of support from family as she says;

...if I want it, if I ask for it, right...I want to do it on my own for a lot of things, she [my middle daughter] is pretty much the one that I will tell if I don't have very much food.

Although Helen will ask for help from other family members if her son really needs something:

...you know it is like all my brothers and sisters are educated so if I really, really do need [something], I can phone up my oldest brothers, oldest brothers and

sisters, I know if I really, really do need that...in a way I guess I use him because I will phone and say "Can I borrow twenty bucks because my son needs this and my son needs that" and you know they will give it to me because they know I am not, I am not using him to say can I get twenty bucks and run to the liquor store...you know.

There are Aboriginal communities near town and Helen discussed whether she felt supported by those Aboriginal communities. Helen replied that she wasn't:

... brought up like that so, like the traditional, like the smudging and all that, we were, I call myself a townie and I call the people on the Rez; Rezies, but that is just me, if someone asks me I say I am a townie I wasn't brought up on the Rez...because there is a difference if you are on a reservation, you do the sweats, you do all the smudges and whatever else that they do but when you don't live on the reservation, you are not part of it...like they do a lot of stuff and if you are not part of the reservation, then basically you are not welcome... but if I go back to where my reservation is, where my parents were from then they are like, "Hey, you know" like I don't live there but here it is like, "What's she doing here, she is a townie, hey it might rub off" (laughter)...it is funny because I am probably related to three-quarters of the people [here on the reserve]".

Anna is another mother that needed some social support from her family and friends as she looked to retain legal counsel. She felt she had been "super lucky to have come across some really key people that have helped". One of those people was her dad, "my father put down a five thousand retainer down on him [lawyer]". She also received emotional support from both her family and friends but, "I couldn't put what I had on anybody because I knew how terrible it was...I knew they were going through their own stuff. So finally Anna felt in the end that she had to do the hard work herself. Anna laments:

...I mean once my mom knew [the story] she was super supportive and another friend was super supportive, she has always been because she can relate to my situation. She knew [about the abuse] and another friend was super supportive and I had a few friends that were super supportive and my cousin but as far as actually doing it I had to be, I had to do it all on my own, there wasn't anybody who...

Anna also gained community support from a group of hockey moms. When her oldest son 'mentioned quite a few times' that he wanted to play on hockey team she felt there was no way she could do so when her work schedule conflicted with practice times and the cost of equipment was out of her budget. However, a friend was aware of her son's situation and approached the local hockey moms who organized a schedule in order for her son to be taken to and from the rink, given all the hockey equipment needed for free and helped with getting on and off his skates for all the practices. Anna was so thankful for the support of her son's dream and herself because as a single working mom with limited funds, she could not have given her son a chance to play hockey without that community of hockey moms. Anna remarks:

...everybody came together in twenty-four hours and had all his gear and everything and gave it to me. He had never put skates on before...[but now] his heart is just in it, he loves it so much...I don't know if it is the venue or a sense of belonging that really honed in on him but...

Charlie's son was also given support by the community when he was chosen to attend a summer youth camp. He was picked up from his small community and driven to the airport in a larger center and then flown to camp. He had all his expenses paid for and was so well liked at the camp he was offered a job for next year as a counsellor. Charlie

was so proud of him and so thankful he was chosen to go as she could not fund that type of camp experience on her limited income. She is thankful for her son to be chosen because... “There were [just] a few kids picked up north from here to go to the camp and my son was one of them”.

One type of community support for Helen comes from a cooking program which she attends once a week. She and her son prepare part of a meal under the guidance of a cook and then join the other members of the group for a sit down meal. Helen is grateful for the food she can take home from the evening and also the emotional support of the group. Recently she woke up too tired to walk the six blocks in icy weather with her three and a half year old son in order to attend the program. The program leader called and offered to pick her up something she really needed because:

I isolate myself, I do it to myself...I stay home...like yesterday we were supposed to...we went to the kitchen and it started at 6:00 but we didn't get there 'til 7:30 because he [son] fell asleep and so I felt I would rather let him sleep than to take him there because he is going to be Gordon Ramsey (lots of laughter). So I didn't take him but the program leader/cook said “Well I will come and get you then”, so I went and woke him up...I was thinking “Oh great, now I have to go and pretend I am happy”, you know, but then when I got there, I wasn't pretending, even though we were an hour and a half late...on my way there I was thinking “Oh man I want to make the butter tarts” and that's what I got to make...(more laughter).

Another support is provided through a community program from a larger center for moms which Helen can attend once a week in her own community. She is able to take her young son and participate in such activities as yoga with other moms and their children:

...we did yoga for a half an hour and he [her son] did yoga with us...he sat there for the first couple of minutes watching us and he come asked if he could do it...I would be doing like the downward dog and you can hear him breathing in and out...I look at him and he is doing everything...

Denalda found she also was supported by someone in the community when she needed help with her son catching the bus from the high school for the first time.

Although Denalda could usually count on her mom for help in this case it was a lady from her son's school that stepped up to help her with her son:

...I have my son not miss the bus but he forgets, he is a forgetful kid...I will be like you are riding the bus today and he will forget I told him to ride the bus...so one day they [his class] went to the high school and they were catching the bus from the high school and he had never done that before but I had to work and my mom doesn't like to drive to town to pick him up...so I was freaking out because what if he gets on the wrong bus when a women who works in his class says, "I can help him"...she was like, "I can help him get on the bus it is no big deal I will walk him out there and everything"... she is such a sweetheart and she is always willing to help, it's nice to have that...yeah I guess living in a small town you have that community support.

Clover is another mother who appreciates the social comfort of a small town and finds living in her home community for over twenty years reassuring..."you are used to everyone knows everybody and you feel safe and you have a comforting place whereas in the city nobody knows anybody". And even though Clover feels the comfort of her small 'village' when it comes to the main support for her son she relies on her close family and feels that her friends at this time are not a choice she would make..."if it came to even one of my friends I don't think I could do that quite yet." Clover trusts her



large extended family to support her as a single mom in her care for her son however she still struggles letting him be away from her side very often:

...I still kind of struggle with that...I will let him go with my mom and dad of course, and my brother and sister-in-law and my grandma who is still great-grandma and my aunties...I don't have a problem with that.

Helen had also stated that people offer to take her son so she can have a break but like Clover she has difficulty trusting people other than her extended family:

...Oh yeah people offer to take him but it's like...it depends, I will let family take him no problems, excuse me but anybody else I don't know them it's like ummm are you really going to watch him?

The above are just some of the examples from the five interviews in this study where the single mothers were supported by family, friends, community and social services in a positive manner. However, each mother also had experiences where they were not supported by family and friends and not helped in their efforts to take care of their child by social services. In a variety of ways each single mom found that there were times when help was offered then withdrawn, incidents when friends betrayed their trust and when the community ignored their situations without even being aware of doing so.

Helen, for example, was the single mother that found that relying on the welfare system did not always treat her fairly in working her case. She believes the way she has been treated is not her fault and stressed that she never lies in her paperwork and always does her best to complete all the forms within the correct time period. And yet more than once Helen felt she was treated unfairly and was in danger of losing her home because she suspects that social workers "...have a special list on the side that when your name pops up..." "Ok then let's fuck with this chick". Helen feels that right from the start she

was treated suspiciously and cannot understand the reason behind it. She prides herself on being honest and conscientious although admittedly not perfect. She has watched people abuse the welfare system and then go crying for help and receive it. She comments that:

...they always gave me a rough time, always...I put in everything they ask for, I jump through every hoop and they still find something that they have to have me do...I say if I went in and [if] I [was] all strung out and hung over and got no food for my son and I need bread “Oh here you go” but if I go in [as a responsible mother] they give me a harder time...I don’t know if it is because they think that I am a liar...the lady at the job search...I went and seen her yesterday I told her that I was having trouble and she said, “I noticed that there are certain people who they do that to...”

Helen’s sense of frustration began when she tried to move out of the safe house and get her own housing in place:

...the hardest thing for me actually was when I was trying to get my own place with social assistance; they gave me such a hard time...I would tell them I don’t have a vehicle...I told them I was in a safe house...they told me if I wanted my rent cheque I had to make it to [the next largest town] by a certain [time], on a certain day. All I said was, “I don’t drive, I can’t afford it, I don’t have any money” and they were like “Well that’s your problem”... “Well I can’t afford it” and they said “Can’t you borrow the money and just give it back after you get your cheque somehow?”

Fortunately Helen was able to access public support and a lady from a community center, “...took me, they helped me out, one of the ladies there drove me down there and the roads were super icy and we went down and got it [the cheque]”.

Helen says she pays her rent and lives frugally and yet still finds it a struggle when things become overwhelming and she needs extra help. In the past her hydro payments were behind and she asked for assistance:

...I was behind...so I phoned them [social services] and asked them ...well I need money. "Well we can give you \$185 but we will take it off your next cheque". I was like what kind of help is that, "If you take it off my cheque then I am going to, then I will be short on rent."... "Oh well that is your problem".

Helen found that she was disadvantaged at times because she was not able to drive and could not travel to the larger center like she was asked to several times by social services. In contrast, Charlie found she was excluded from receiving any assistance from social services because *she did own her own car* and that car according to the assessment was too valuable for her to keep and she was told she would have to sell it first before she could receive any financial support from the government:

...the same thing because I have my car that was the reason I couldn't get on welfare because they told me that my car is worth too much money and I had to sell it and live off of that for however long before I was eligible to receive welfare or whatever. I said "They don't have buses [public transport] here, how do I get my son to school?"...and he went to school a ways away so you know what I mean? I said I am not selling my car, people just said put it in your mom's name but I wanted to do it honestly...I didn't want to chance it I just wanted to be honest...I just need help for a little bit and...

Charlie has her car to this day and has only ever received unemployment benefits when she was unable to work due to her surgeries.

As presented above, some single mothers have experienced on-going challenges when attempting to gain consistent support and services from government agencies. Similarly,

several mothers in this study lost anticipated support and backing from trusted friends when they became single parents. People they could formally rely on for support, empathy, understanding, and comfort were suddenly not available to them. Therefore, for some of these women, not only had they lost their partners and became lone mothers but also lost their supportive network of friends.

One such mom was Denalda who found that she was unable to count on many of her former girlfriends because she discovered that several had been cheating with her husband.

...I had a few friends I kept, unfortunately other friends I had when I was married he was sleeping with so I came out of that [marriage] with few friends. So I had two or three good friends that I knew he wasn't sleeping with but the other ones he was totally sleeping with...even with them [the friends not sleeping with him] like decide either you are friends with me or friends with him, you can't be friends with both because of what he did. I am sorry to do that but that is how I feel, I am not going to lie, if you are going to be friends with him, I am not going to be friends with you.

Denalda also had a friend that had sided with her for many years until circumstances changed for that friend and Denalda lost another supportive ally.

...so this year he [ex-husband] moved up to where one of my good high school friend lives and his kids are going to school with her kids and she is telling me she has decided she is not going to be mad at him anymore...so I kind of feel I have lost my last good friend because she has decided she is just going to not hate him anymore...I didn't ask you to hate him but when you have a really good friend and they hate that person and [then] I am like, "Me too".

Denalda is not the only single mother that lost a long and trusted friendship because of the friend choosing to side with her ex-husband. Anna also suffered a similar loss of a

close friend when a girlfriend, after leaving her husband the first time, “tricked” her into meeting with her estranged husband against her knowledge:

...so the kids and I lived with some friends but after a few months my friend was really encouraging me to talk to my ex and I really didn't want to. I was scared to be around him even when his name was mentioned I was like scared...I told her that there's no chance I can't...it won't be beneficial to anyone...But anyway she ended up setting me up, she asked me to watch her baby while her and her boyfriend went out, so I was watching all the kids and then my ex came over...she had set him up to come and talk to me.

Anna feels now that she was betrayed by her friend, someone whom she trusted with the safety of herself and her young sons. She says, “now that I really understand where I was and how she could have done that, that is pretty, that is an ultimate betrayal”.

Anna also finds that the majority of people in her former community taking her ex-husband's side, “I think in a way because of how much trauma he has been through and his parents passing away in the last few years and his wife leaving...”. So Anna has found herself isolated socially from a close and caring community that was formally supportive to both herself and her sons.

Anna's sense of loss comes from losing close friends and a supportive community but also from the shock of : “...yeah I never really prepared myself for what people would perceive me as, so I really wasn't prepared for that and that's a struggle on its own too”. Anna is especially shocked by people she thought knew her and her situation. She expected that they would support her and look out for her best interests but that was not the case with:

...like the friend that I stayed with she had seen the stuff he had done to me, she knew everything, I don't understand, in between the time I had, this is throwing

someone under the bus right now but, I won't do it publically do it, when I left the first time and came back, she {my friend} and my ex actually, I don't know how far they got but they were kissing each other...

So as a consequence Anna acquired more loss and confusion in her life rather than find the aid and assistance she needed. She felt abandoned and betrayed by the very people she expected to understand her situation and support her efforts to protect her children and herself by becoming a single mother. Anna laments when asked if she felt betrayed:

...yeah left and right by people I thought were, they knew, they really knew, it baffles me, it's scary to let people know how things are and it is scary to know you can tell somebody the truth and it is not a good truth and they just kind of "huh". It is insane. They said, "Well he is a good guy maybe he is going through a lot right now."...I know but should I go through all this violence...anyway I look back now and it is like "wow".

The lack of support from friends is not as tragic for all the mothers as it appears to have been for both Anna and Denalda. Clover has just found that former friends were often her party friends and she just isn't into that lifestyle anymore since the birth of her son. Clover sadly states that:

...unfortunately for me when I was younger I was friends with a lot of unhealthy people so since I have had my son I have cut off most of my relationships with friends...so I am trying to build new ones. I have one of my [old] friends that I still, you know, and we talk but she is unhappy and she likes to drink and party a lot...her life revolves around what mine used to so I can't blame anyone...I just cut off pretty much all of my relationships and so I don't have much in common with them now.

Charlie finds a similar situation at her work place and never socializes at the place where she works. She has had co-workers who have work side by side with her for months before she finds out that they even have children or that their children live elsewhere. Charlie cannot relate to those mothers at all and says that:

...After work I go home...on my days off I am not at the pub...it is strictly a job for me ...even girls that have come on at the pub and [worked] with them for how many months and they say something about their and like, “You have a kid?” and “Yeah, they live at their grandparents”. How do you not have your kid with you? ... I can’t relate, you know and I don’t want to relate either.

## Summary

Social support is important in all people’s lives but especially in the lives of these single mothers. Whether that support comes from friends, family or social services; the importance of a social safety net is front and center in each mother’s story. Social support, human connection and community backing as experienced by the mothers in this study can be truly beneficial. Yet conversely, the lack of social support, the withdrawal or loss of friends and family and the disconnection from a previously caring community produced a hurtful and detrimental source of frustration, betrayal and pain for many of the single mothers in this study.

In each of the stories told above the single moms were exposed to two kinds of social contact, negative and positive. Each single mom had to work within the social safety net as it was available to her and her child. Each mother had to navigate their own path, finding the positive support they needed from friends, family and the welfare system while attempting to avoid or at least persevere with social connections that were at the least: unhelpful and unsupportive and at the most: punishing and destructive.

**Finances: Often a Struggle – Always a Challenge**

The single mothers in this study appear to have one thing in common; all have struggled to acquire a steady income large enough to provide consistently for their lone parent home. Each mom has strived to provide a stable and secure home, food and clothing for their children and health care for their family all on a restricted budget. Some mothers have used social assistance to finance their lone parent homes; other mothers have worked several jobs to provide enough for their family while still others have changed jobs to accommodate their new existence in a single parent home. In all cases finances have been a concern and a serious consideration in the determination of how the mothers in this study are able to maintain an environment that is healthy and safe for their young sons.

Charlie, the thirty seven year old mother that has been a single parent for the longest amount of time, has worked up to four jobs during one time period to provide for her son. Charlie has tried to gain support from social assistance but as mentioned above she has been unable to access any help other than unemployment benefits for short fifteen week periods after her many stays in the hospital. When her young son was around three years old Charlie says:

...I paid two sets of rent and two sets of bills [in order to maintain consistent child care] but that wasn't the only job I had, I worked there Monday to Friday [for a landscaping company] and I worked at the legion on Wednesday nights...I worked in a pub ...it would close [at] one or one thirty so I would work there on the weekends and occasionally during the week and the babysitter and I cleaned the apartment building we lived in so we made money off of that...they took [the wages] off of her rent.



Although Charlie was receiving some money from her son's father at that time she was not going through family maintenance, "or anything like that so we were just doing it between us. So it was nowhere near the amount he should have been paying and it wasn't a regular thing".

Both moms Clover and Helen know what it is like to receive little to no money inconsistently from their children's fathers. Helen and Clover do not count on any help from their ex-partners and both have not yet gone through the courts in an attempt to improve the situation at this time. Helen laughs as she gives an account of the last time she received money from her son's dad. She says that:

...I don't want nothing from him, he has given me 126 bucks, only no, only a 100 dollars because he gave me a 126 dollar cheque and I couldn't cash it so he did...so it cost him 5 bucks so well he goes, "I [still] need 20 dollars to eat".

Clover believes her son's dad has good intentions of providing something for them but says:

...his dad always had an excuse as to why he couldn't come spend time with our son and he hardly ever sends any child support...he can't keep a job for very long and he is always full of empty promises...

Charlie does now receive money from her son's dad through family maintenance but finds that receiving the full amount is still not consistent:

...Yeah but I haven't had really good luck with them the maintenance either, twice now they have credited his account in arrears, like he was behind, like one time he was over a thousand dollars' worth of arrears and they credited his account, I don't know how, I don't know why, yeah...I tried to prove it...I tried [but] I don't know.

Anna does not have anything official set up with her sons' father for child support but has access to a joint account and uses funds from there to pay for groceries. She pays for everything else from her new job. Anna had been working part time in town but was unable to find affordable housing there and the travel costs to and from the home she was finally able to afford would have been exorbitant:

... Yeah I didn't have a lot of money but I did start this new job, I do get paid well in that way...without getting that job I don't think I could be where I am today...[unfortunately Anna was forced to accept a 30% reduction in her wages starting in the new year].

Anna found the cost of daycare very expensive when she first left and before both children were in elementary school. She says that, "now that the kids are in school it is not so bad but it was a huge bill, it was more than my mortgage, having a couple of kids in daycare. I am receiving no help from my ex for daycare at all". She also finds that when her sons are on summer holidays she is back to paying for full time daycare because of working full time at her own job.

Another expense Anna incurred was that of her counsellor's fees. Although her husband's costs for therapy were covered by his job and the fees for the couple's counselling was also paid for by her husband's policy; Anna's own personal individual therapy had to be paid from her own wages. She stresses that, "After I left the second time for the last year and a bit I have been paying her [counsellor]. I know she gives me a break on it because she does base her fees [and] everything off of wages".

Anna has found leaving her marriage and becoming a single mother was “majorly positive” in the fact that she and her sons were out of a hostile environment however she states that:

...the negative part is definitely the financial burden and basically my ex still has on me as far as control financially, that's been a big struggle...what that [means] for me is not getting child support, [it] is definitely a struggle and stuff and trying to do what is right I guess and get myself a lawyer...that has been really, really hard...he sees that I left that lifestyle, so basically I shouldn't [get to] live a good lifestyle, outside of our marriage...I will take care of myself but it is the kids that shouldn't do without.”

Anna says that if she had had the financial resources originally she would not have returned to her husband after the first time she had left but being financially strapped influenced her decision, “I felt like there wasn't a lot of options, really in my heart I knew it wasn't right. Yeah, if I actually had money, I would have had a lawyer ahead of time, knowing what I know now.”

Likewise the effect of not having any child support or monetary help from her son's father has certainly affected Helen's ability to finically provide even the basics for her three and a half year old son. She routinely accesses the food bank to supplement her grocery stocks:

...they are pretty helpful actually, they know me with my son because I go the center a lot...for the food bank and for the bread ...yes [I go] at least I go once every couple of months. You are allowed to go once a month, you can go every four weeks, but you can go for bread every Tuesday, it depends on the bakery how many [loaves]of bread they have because they donate their bread to the food bank.

Helen also keeps a small stash of change in case she is short and needs milk for her son. When asked how stressful it is for Helen not to have money for food on a scale of one to ten, with one being no stress and ten being extremely stressful, she replied that she was:

...I would say probably about an eight, I always have, if like I don't have milk and stuff like that, I will try to have a little spot where I have a little bit of change where I know there is enough to buy milk and bread and/or baloney...he loves baloney, so he is a Newfie so it is in his genes (laughter)...he is Newfie and he is Native so he has a double whammy with that (more laughter).

Helen has also had financial worries recently because last month's welfare cheque was pulled and she became delinquent on rent payments. At the time of her interview she was worried that she could be homeless within the week if she could not sort out the complications that had caused her assistance cheque to be cancelled. She said:

...I haven't got my cheque and I got the eviction notice...actually I think I am supposed to ...I think they are supposed to kick me out Monday but this is the first time...I have only ever...only the second time I have been late with my rent [in two years]. They told me on the phone...I asked them what was the status of my cheque ...they came on "Oh well as long as you put in your declaration you will get your next cheque", I said "Well I haven't even got my last cheque"... "Oh hold on" and then they were like, "You didn't get your declaration in"...and I am like "Yeah I did!"... "Well according to us you didn't, according to your file you didn't but if you run down to the office right now, you will get your next cheque in a couple of days but we have to re-issue your last cheque".

Helen was unable to sort out her situation over the phone to workers in Vancouver and she didn't have the funds to meet a worker in the area face to face because, "if you want to see a [social] worker [in person] you have to go to a larger center as far as I know

and, they expect you to get to there by 4:30 to pick up a cheque or whatever, well I can't afford to get there.

So Helen was not only worried about receiving her lost cheque but worried that the consequences of not having the money to pay her rent would cause her and her young son to be evicted before Christmas. She attempted to re-assure the manager of her apartment complex that her cheque was on its way. However, the manager needed confirmation from social services that the cheque was indeed arriving soon:

...I was kind of frustrated because I was worried about my rent...cause my landlord told me to get a letter saying when my cheque was supposed to be in and a letter of confirmation that they were sending my rent...and they wanted me to get my rent cheque made out to the property so I asked them [social services] that...and she said "Oh, we don't do that".

Helen, now needing to put in her declaration for the next month, got her young son dressed [outdoor winter clothing] and, "drug him down there [about five city blocks ] and filled them out [declarations] and told them what [had happened] and she was like "As far as I know [you] did put in a declaration". So Helen worried throughout the holidays that she would be evicted and was only able to buy one or two small things for her son at Christmas.

Helen is not the only mom in the study to have worried about having no food in the house as well as being troubled by the thought that her rental payment would be due before she had the funds to pay it. Before Charlie was able to get into income based housing which allows the rent to fluctuate if she gets sick or anything; she remembers coming home from the hospital and being told to rest by her doctor for the next six months but:

...when I was in the other townhouse paying my bills and paying thirteen hundred dollars a month or whatever...or you could just be evicted...I was only back in town for a week and I started working [because] I had already been lying in a hospital bed for almost a month, so there's a month gone by with no money that's due me you know what I mean?...I am going to work; we have no food...that's typically how it was because my son was like, "We have no food", and I am like, "I know".

Charlie could not even use credit to 'tide her over' in the bad times "because I don't have a credit rating, I don't have those kinds of things [credit cards] I don't have that kind of stuff". When Charlie decided to buy her car her only alternative without credit was to [work] two jobs... "And I saved a lot of money and I bought my car, I paid cash for it". Charlie has received E.I. (employment insurance) several times when she has been hospitalized but says:

...yes... E.I.... yes I have gotten it for fifteen weeks or whatever...but like I said the doctor said I will see you in six months well fifteen weeks is well you know [only] three months...and I have me and I have my son...so when you come back after three weeks being at the hospital or a month being in a hospital you have no good food in your frig you have no...you know what I mean, everything is due, your rent is due, your bills are due, everything and you haven't worked for three or four weeks, that is two pay cheques.

Charlie was asked if she had ever received any food vouchers or if she has ever used the food banks in town to help her through the tough times when she was short of food; she replied that she has never been able to qualify for even food vouchers because of owning her own car and furthermore has found herself leery of food banks since going to a church funded food depot with another single mom:

...but everything is expired...don't quote me on this but this is an opinion but I think they hoard it [food]...even the girl that lived next door to me, the lady that lived next to me, same as me a single mom or whatever, she would always complain about bugs and stuff and I would say it is because of that old food. Like you will go there and they have a pantry full of stuff and they will...she said come with me at the church that time and everything is expired...all of it is expired.

So Charlie has a struggle when it comes to feeding her growing teenage son who decided two years ago to begin lifting weights and body building. Charlie laughs because she says, "I am not going to try to deter him from that because you are supposed to give to your kids...you want him to eat that kind of stuff...yeah everyone has to fight with their kids to eat healthy". So Charlie struggles to afford the kind of food her son wants to eat and finds her sister really unaware of what it costs to feed a growing teenager working on developing his muscles and building his physique. She says to her sister:

...you have a daughter and she eats like a bird, like you have no idea what my son can pack away...he probably eats seven eggs with beef and whatever in it in the morning you know and three pieces of toast and the lunches when he goes to school, he doesn't take ten bucks and go to the convenience store, he eats chicken, rice, vegetables, you know he takes a full meal...he doesn't just take a juice box, a sandwich and an apple, he takes...eating healthy is really expensive; the difference between a bag of cherries [in the grocery stores here in town] and a bag of chips is phenomenal...you have to be there, you have to be able to cook that, like a pack of hamburger [compared] to a pack of chicken, it is twenty three bucks to six or seven bucks you know, it's huge...

Finally, Charlie did attempt to supplement her limited paycheck by taking on a cleaning contract at a mine. However, once the mine closed down she was laid off without warning and without the pay she was due, "you didn't get paid like everyone else, they were always late with our cheques...when they shut down they were about

eight or nine weeks behind in pay for us...they called us...and said we are shutting the doors and you don't have a job, and if you want your money you can go to small claims court. Charlie didn't go to court and it cost her hundreds financially in lost income.

Denalda is another mother that is careful with her money because her job is not an especially high paying one. Denalda used to work at a mill and was making more than twice the amount per hour she is being paid now but for her she was willing to sacrifice financial independence and security in order to be there for her young son. Denalda talks about when she made the decision to leave her high paying mill job and the shift work it entailed to stay home until her son was in school full time:

...so I had a year off for maternity [but] I had to quit working at seven months and when my son was seven months I was supposed to go back...on the second day I lost it...it's a good job I had at the mill, a really good job so I walked up the stairs and I told the HR guy "I quit and I am going home to my son". I stayed home with my son for five years I think until he started school and then I went back part-time...I know there are better jobs out there but working here allows me more time with my son cause for that I would give up all the money in the world.

Denalda was able to choose to stay home because she was living with her parents and with their support as well as consistent child support payments from her son's father, she was financially stable. She also contributes to living at her parents by paying rent but also says, "I pay my rent money and we renovated the house and we built fences and we do anything to help, it's not like I am just lying on the couch".

However, she is very careful with the money she does make now and she does pay rent to her parents. She was able to save enough from her wages recently to take her son



and her parents on a trip with her to Disneyland, “it took a long time [to save the money] but we did it...it wasn’t a big extravagant stay at a big hotel but kids don’t remember that anyway, they just remember the fun stuff”. Denalda speaks more about her values regarding money and about her priorities as a single mother and how they affect her financially below:

It’s hard, I really budget, I don’t make a lot of money, I work hard for my money and I probably could go out to a mill and get a job but I want to be there for my son...so I have kind of resolved myself to the fact I am not going to have a lot of money but I have been there to raise my son”.

A financial struggle for Denalda as a single mother was realized just after the birth of her son. She was working out at a gym and after improvements were made the cost of the membership became unaffordable for her:

I would go to the gym and then they renovated the gym and the price of the membership went through the roof. And they had a teen discount and a seniors discount but I had to pay what all the eighteen to twenty year olds, that group of people that make a ton of money, I had to pay that... [I thought] why don’t you guys have a single mom discount, I make sixteen dollars an hour, I can’t afford four hundred dollars...I had to quit going to the gym...I talked to them and I did say that not everybody makes seventy thousand dollars a year in this age group...what if you guys did a T4 thing [because]...?

So as a consequence of not having the financial funds to pay for a gym membership Denalda was excluded from, “an outlet [that] got me out socially and talking to people” and improving her physical and mental fitness in a socially supportive atmosphere. She also found that a lack of funds determined whether or not her son would have the opportunity to play particular sports offered in the community.

She remembers thinking:

...he [her son] is into soccer and swimming and thank God he isn't into hockey...I couldn't afford that you know not only a lot of the moms [who] do that are moms that are married they don't have jobs, you have to volunteer a certain amount of the time when you are in those groups, you have to! What am I supposed to do now, [I said] "Honey, I just can't afford it" and he was like "Whatever, I don't like skating anyway".

The cost of community sports is not the only stress on finances for Denalda when discussing her developing young son. Although she uses her regular child support payments only for her son; she still finds it a challenge to provide everything for her growing child. She comments that, "the support payments from my son's dad...go straight to my son... [but] you know they need shoes every other week and he just started wearing glasses last year and now he needs a new pair because he wrecked this pair". When Denalda was asked if she had ever looked into getting financial support so she could access a subsidy for gym fees or hockey money or prescription glasses for her son she replied:

"No, I think mostly because of the fact that I do live with my parents and I feel like if I did that I would take money away from somebody who really needs it. There has to be single moms out there that don't have the support I do, I know there is, there has to be, right? I can think of two right now you know that could use that money so if I am sucking up that money, like I am ok... I have a relatively new car.

Finally, young single mom Clover also had some concerns when receiving financial support through the welfare system. She was led to believe that the 'system' would look after follow-up with her son's dad and believed child support would be forthcoming from her ex-partner:

...they [social workers] are like you got your money...good are good and you got this, you are good. They were supposed to follow up with his [son's] dad because they said, "we have got this covered...you have got your money and we will go after his dad.

Clover's decision regarding her son and her situation is out of her hands because she is financially dependent on the social assistance program. Clover felt relieved to receive welfare money because she felt like a burden when totally reliant on her parents for all her and her son's needs. She says, "I could provide for my son without completely relying on my parents ...I was also able to help with groceries and pay a little rent which made me feel less like a burden.

However, she has relied on her parents and her extended family to financially supplement her social assistance by providing transportation (Clover does not drive and taxis, the only means of public transportation, are expensive within her small community) causing Clover to comment, "I hate the thought of wasting money on a cab when I know that I can walk there unless it is freezing cold of course... but I have family that would definitely say, "You know Clover come on we are taking you to buy groceries or whatever". The financial 'subsidizing' by her family also includes providing occasional child care (such as during the interview time for this study when her little son stayed with his auntie) and even laundry costs are taken care of because:

Yeah, so I do all of my laundry at mom and dad's... it is like three dollars to wash and another three dollars to dry so it is just like ridiculous and they are not really big washers and dryers so you end up spending twenty or twenty-five bucks just to do a few bits of laundry. I rely on my parents so much it is terrible but I mean obviously if I didn't have them [parents] I would just do it there.

## **Summary**

All the single mothers in this study had issues, for various reasons, regarding limited financial funds. Their concerns ranged from providing a decent and stable home to affording enough quality food for their growing children. Whether their concerns regarded the provision of transportation, clothing, sports' fees and even prescription glasses; their options and decisions were affected by the tightness of their budgets. Two of the moms realize that their families have greatly supplemented their income with services and support they provide on a regular basis. The rest of the moms are able to rely on child support payments to give them and their children some financial assistance. What is clear for all the mothers interviewed is that limited finances play a large part in determining how well they can provide for their children and what 'hoops they must jump through' to give their sons a chance to grow up in a healthy, safe and secure environment.

## **Mental Health: Depressed, Stressed and Anxious Moms**

In this small study of single mothers all interviews contained the words stress, anxiety and worry; some contained the words panic and depression. Each mother had times when her situation or circumstances caused her severe mental distress and often over prolonged periods of time. Consequently, while continuing to care for their children, each lone mom has had her own way of coping with her mental health issues. These mothers have not only had to deal with their own mental health situations but have also tried to cope with or manage the mental health issues plaguing some of their ex-partners. Some mothers have used counselling, prayer, meditation and/or yoga to cope with their emotional

turmoil, while others have needed the medical intervention of pharmaceuticals. One mom chooses to relieve her distress in a ‘natural’ way by smoking marijuana. Finally, our youngest mother found that much of her teenage depression and low self-esteem seemed to evaporate once she had delivered her new born baby. However, she is still plagued by bouts of extreme anxiety and some panic attacks. The following are accounts of coping with mental health by the five single moms.

Clover, the youngest mom, completely changed her lifestyle when she discovered that she was expecting her son. She, “soon began to realize that all the chaos and drama inside me was melted away, finally there was a light living within me...I [had] rarely felt safe inside my own thoughts and now my mind was able to rest”. Clover remembers that, “most of my teenage and young adult life I struggled with my self-worth but when my son was born... [it] was the first time I felt so content since I was a child”.

While Clover gained a sense of contentment after the birth of her son, she soon realized that she found:

One of the hardest things for me [is] knowing that our son’s life is entirely my responsibility because his dad is not capable...it is the hardest when my son gets sick I feel so helpless because it gives me extreme anxiety.

While Clover now suffers from ‘extreme anxiety’ at times; she can now see that the depression she suffered from in the past has greatly improved. And while she now finds that her good days are out weighing the dark ones; her anxiety is a major stressor for her:

What’s hard for me is I have extreme anxiety when it comes to my son like and before I had him I had a lot of depression so when I had him I was like overjoyed like I almost have no bad days, well I still have some bad days but very minimal

now, as to where before I was just like go spiralling down a hole but now I can see a bright future and everything, I can see things are going to be ok.

Clover deals with her anxiety in several ways from taking prescribed medication, seeing a counsellor and spending time with her son in the company and comfort of her parent's home until she feels more emotionally stable:

My anxiety is through the roof especially like when he gets sick, if he even gets a cold...well I am [a bit] better now ...but if he gets a fever and he is throwing up, for some reason my thoughts instantly go to the worst place like he is going to be hospitalized, he could possibly die...and my mind likes to go through all the worst case scenarios and then inside I just freak right out and I have to take Ativan...I have to calm myself down...I have to call my mom... poor mom and she is like, "Clover this happened to you when you were a kid...its normal"...[but] somebody really has to talk me out of it but then for a week I can't be alone with him. We have to go stay out at my parent's for like a week until I regulate.

Clover deals with her extreme anxiety at the time with medication but she has also tried to work with a counsellor because she says, "I am a pretty strong person in all other areas but that one area is my weakness [coping emotionally when her son is sick] and I get mad at myself because I want to be [better]". Clover sees a counsellor and is attempting to improve her thought processes and her belief in her own abilities to care for her son. She also uses prayer as a way to cope with her anxiety:

I went to a counsellor at the clinic and she recommended some books and stuff and some affirmations to say in my head...the one thing that I am, because I have faith, that is the one thing that gets me through is I pray a lot and you know just say I am safe, I am protected...don't go to the dark spot, don't do that, just step back and believing that your thoughts are not, you can't believe your thoughts all the time...in a situation like my son is sick, my frigging head is like

‘wheeee’ like nowhere near anything rational. I just have to talk myself through it.

Clover is hopeful through therapy, affirmations and prayer that she will get to the point where she is able to, “stay at home while my son has the flu and take care of him...without mom and dad coming to the rescue or my family coming to the rescue. I want to get there”.

Finally, while Clover finds it hard to deal with her own anxiety she also feels that much of her distress is compounded because her son’s father is not able to help her with the care of their son. She says, “...so if somebody was there you know like his dad or a partner or whatever it would be a lot better because you know [he] can watch him while I am freaking out.”

However she realizes that her son’s father is battling his own mental health issues.

Clover laments:

I have talked to him so many times, “Please do it for our son, do it for our son” ...and there will be weeks where like he will say like, “I have been sober for months” and then it goes up and down and up and down so I never expect him to be sober. I pray for him of course, I pray for all the best but...

So Clover finds that her son’s dad, rather than being a support in raising their son, is someone she must protect her child from because he has the illness of addiction. She understands that if her ex-partner, “did want to come and see him I would be putting my son in danger right ...at least I know he knows that he is not able to, he is very understanding and is a good person at heart... because of the drugs it is just they have no choice but to lie about everything”.

Clover has educated herself on the world of addiction and has been able to:

...instead of judge him and get mad at him about a lot of things and save us a lot of conflict I am able to focus on coming from a more understanding place...we have a good relationship and I have come to terms that this is how it is going to be...his dad may not ever get healthy and I have come to terms with that...so if he wants to be a part of our son's life, you know it would have to be pretty monitored, very watched...I would never just say "You are going to [go] visit dad."

Helen, the most mature mom in the study, also suffers from anxiety and high stress.

Helen has tried to change her thoughts concerning herself. She said, "Yeah, like with my rent and stuff, I was all bent out of shape and stressed out and stuff and then it's starting to work out because I was getting stressed out but you got to quit because he [her three and a half year old son] gets stressed out."

Helen and her young son often walk around town which helps relieve them both of their stress and anxiety. She laughs, "And when he gets stressed out he wants to go walking ... [even] at 6:00 or 7:00 at night, 'let's go for a walk' and if it wasn't for him...he drags me out of the house, he makes me do stuff". Helen also believes in:

...the Creator, God, whatever most people call him...if I didn't have something to believe in...I would be hiding in my house, not wanting to come out, when I think about going out I used to get bad anxiety attacks ...I used to think, "I have got to go check the mail" and then I would just start shaking.

Helen decided to seek help with her emotional issues and began to see a health counsellor:

I can't say her name, ...she said she has seen a change in me...I said to her; "I don't want to be angry and bitter because I don't have time for it... [now] I can walk around holding my head high, I never did anything wrong because at first I



was ashamed to walk around, it is a lot of the reason why I was having anxiety. I have to just keep on living and moving on and I can't keep dwelling in the past and whining because that is going to get me no place, right?

However Helen felt great stress when she tried to 'move on' and file papers in order to acquire full custody of her son. She feared, "if I was doing this he [her son's father] would use it against me, I was like, "Oh gosh... he knows what I am like". Helen felt her stress rise when her husband threatened her after receiving the papers asking for sole custody. Helen recalls her husband's phone message, "Well I have help, [and] I've got people backing me". She was not really concerned about his group of friends but she was concerned when he said, "All the pot you smoke, I am going to use that against you"... I thought OMG... I was freaking out because I am a pot head. And when asked whether Helen uses pot to cope with her anxiety she was adamant that:

Yes, I would rather smoke than take pills because they give you Ativan; [it] is really wicked. If people know you buy it, you get it; they will wait for you at the clinic and then follow you to the drugstore and sit outside and wait for you. People have come up to me and asked me, "Do you have any pills and it's like (laughter) Flintstones or One a Day?"

Finally, Helen addresses her husband's mental health issues and his addiction to alcohol in regards to the safety of her young son. She says, "I would like him to have a relationship with him [ex-husband] but it has to be sober, I don't want no harm to come to him [son]. I have it written down, he has to be sober and I said no alcohol whatsoever".

Anna is another mother concerned with her husband's alcohol consumption, his mental health issues and the safety of her children. As stated previously Anna shares

custody for her sons with her husband. Her husband was seeing a psychiatrist through healthcare and was enrolled in three different support programs. Anna stated that:

But ummm 90% of the time I feel stable and 10% though is bad, there have been things that have happened lately that I have phoned the ministry...ummm when my ex had the kids, he crashed his truck and it was a low impact, low speed whatever, the truck slid around on the ice and went into the ditch. Nobody was hurt, [but] my youngest son wasn't wearing a seat belt.

Anyway (Anna chokes up) another time before, he and the kids...the kids were with him and I don't know what my ex was doing but he told me ...that he had passed out. He was like, "I just passed out yesterday"...so basically [a friend] found him [unconscious in his truck] ...we are like, "Well did you go to the hospital? [No], "Well how do you know you are OK?" and he was like "I just know I am" [Anna fears] maybe he was just too drunk and passed out in the truck, I don't know, who knows?

Anna's stress levels have greatly increased because, "I am really concerned that he passed out in his truck...somebody had to pick him up and bring him home...it is really concerning because he is responsible for the kids, he is clearly not in any condition to do so". Finally, a case file was opened on her husband but that just brought further stress because her husband, "...is losing his shit because someone is trying to 'ruin' him"...and he blames her and she says, "and here I am trying to do a good thing and protect my fucking kids, pardon my language I am really upset, ummm now I could be getting my hand slapped for it."

Anna continues to deal with her stress by regularly attending therapy with her counsellor and has "learned through counselling for all this time a lot of men around here...have an old school mentality where women are not equal; that women themselves

are possessions, and I never really understood it or seen it until I learned about it". Anna now has a better understanding of her situation. The support from her counsellor has gone a long way in keeping her from being "just shut down" and she is now better able to cope with her current position. Anna also practices yoga and breathing exercises to relieve her stress.

Denalda is another mother that has protected her son from his father during times when he has been intoxicated. She has, "full custody and guardianship of her son" and has come to an understanding with her son's father regarding the terms of his visitation. Denalda found it stressful in the past when "he [son's father] would come to the house with alcohol on his breath...I let him come to the house whenever he wanted, he just wasn't allowed to take him [her son] away from the house". In present times, Denalda finds her stress manageable and her worries are concerns regarding her son, "I worry about someone not stopping at a crosswalk" or when in a big city, "I worry about someone grabbing him; you know that's every mom's worry..." Finally, Denalda has found that being "fairly assertive" has seemed to have served her well in maintaining her emotional and mental well-being during the early years and until this day she deals with negative situations head-on and by staying true to herself... She says, "I [am] the same person...you put me in any situation and I am still me...if there is an elephant in the room I point it out...why avoid it, it's right there, if we talk about it, it goes away right? It is not an elephant anymore".

Both Denalda and Charlie have been single moms for the longest in this study and both seem to have learned coping skills and positive ways of thinking that keep them emotionally stable and their stress levels manageable. Both of these moms have the

oldest sons in the group. Both boys are becoming old enough now to be much less dependent on their moms for their everyday needs. Moreover Denalda and Charlie are the only two moms that have full custody of their sons as well as mandated child support payments. While both these moms went through extremely stressful situations and circumstances when first becoming single mothers and have dealt with frustrating times occasionally as they raised their sons; neither mother spoke of dealing with high levels of stress, anxiety or depression in present times.

### **Summary**

The five moms in this study have each had to deal with situations and circumstances which have caused great stress, extreme anxiety and/or some levels of depression at various times throughout their lives as single mothers. Nevertheless, each mom has continued to be able to care for her child and has done her best to maintain a positive home environment for her children. In only one case, as with young single mom Clover, has a mom experienced an improvement in her general mental health after the birth of her son; all the other moms in this study suffered significantly increased degrees of stress and anxiety after joining single motherhood. And even Clover, who did have some improvement in her depression postnatal, still suffers great anxiety when dealing with the well-being of her child. Every single mother in this study has in the past or is currently suffering extreme stress and/or anxiety during the process of rearing their child as a lone parent. It attests to the emotional strength and perseverance of these single moms that they continue to cope with 'life' while single-handedly raising their children.

### **Legalities: Legal Challenges and Custody Battles**

The single moms interviewed for this narrative study all have had legal concerns regarding their children. As mentioned previously, Charlie and Denalda have both been able to gain full custody of their young sons. The other mothers in this group are at different stages in their efforts to work within the legal system in order to protect their children, provide for them financially and accommodate a safe relationship between their sons and their fathers. These mothers have often found it a struggle and even a battle to acquire the best legal representation at an affordable cost within the northern community where they live.

Anna is the mother who is currently in a contentious battle with her ex-husband and is struggling to trust in the legal resources available to her. Anna has had to seek legal counsel in a distant city, because her husband had at one time or another retained the other family lawyers in the surrounding area close to Anna's community. She says, "I can't have any lawyer represent me because it is a conflict of interest because my ex has every lawyer there wrapped up in something because of his family suing all those people...I couldn't get a lawyer there". Anna was given the name of the lawyer she has now from her counsellor and feels lucky to have him because, "He is just a normal family lawyer and whatever, but he is fired up by this [the treatment Anna is receiving from her ex-husband's lawyer] and there is something in his heart that just drives him". Anna originally thought;

...my ex and I were going to do a separation agreement, and do a child [custody and support] agreement and go on our merry way ummm but it didn't happen that way so now my retainer is spent and nothing has happened, my whole retainer is spent because my ex got himself a really fancy lawyer, a big fancy

lawyer who does not represent people like my ex so I have no idea how and why they even got connected. Like her retainer before court is like sixty thousand dollars and he has her and she has been fighting for him all this time...because he has the money and she knows how the system works...she will just go around and around in circles so it just never goes before a judge, that's what she does.

Anna looks defeated as she says, "he [her ex-husband] wants to financially burden me into submission; that is her [his lawyer] tactic...that's what she does and she is successful". When asked if Anna had ever considered using legal aid to help her because she doesn't have the funds to keep paying for her lawyer she says, "I don't think I want to use legal aid against my ex's lawyer...she will chew them up and spit them out...and I make too much money so they wouldn't [work with me]. Fortunately Anna's lawyer is willing to help her and, "work with me and as things come I will try to pay him as much as I can... [when] it comes to court [he thinks] we have a strong enough case that he won't ask for my court retainer, then after trial I will pay him back...nobody ever does that and I am super, super lucky".

Unfortunately Anna must deal with a new legal situation arising after she informed social services of her deep concerns regarding her sons' safety. She reported that she believed her husband was not mentally competent to care, without supervision, for his under aged children. Now Anna worries because:

Now social services have had a meeting with my ex and they are going to his house and his lawyer will come to be there with him when they come so he doesn't say anything wrong. ...it is insane. So in the end I have to tell myself, even if I do get in trouble... I have to be ok with whatever repercussions there are because if something does happen [to my boys] I could never live with myself again.

Finally Anna comments that because of the allegations regarding her husband which she says, “he has pretty much pieced together that it [was] me...he is coming after me; I have been subpoenaed to court”. And Anna finds herself in a situation where, “Now I have to pay money and I have to prepare a case.” When asked if Anna believes that if she had better financial backing that she would be in a better legal position she states, “You mean like lawyer wise, I don’t think there would be anybody here [in the surrounding area]...it would be difficult to get someone like her...it is really, really crazy”. Anna’s ex-husband’s lawyer wants to do, “a discovery examination, so... they basically give interviews and ask you a series of questions...anyways it is like a cross examination but outside of court...so she [ex’s lawyer] wants to do that on me and I have to pay like ten grand to do it” and Anna worries about the outcome however she does have hope and she relates, “Oh and I think my lawyer is smart enough the way he is...I think we have a chance and I do believe in him”.

Anna is not the only mom currently dealing with the legal system. Helen is also currently waiting for a court date in order to gain custody of her son. And although Helen had some concerns regarding her husband and his threat to use her pot smoking against her she:

...went and filled the papers, it was about three months and I had to fill out everything. I went to social services...I asked them where do I go to get papers to get full custody so they said, “we can print them out for you” or I could have went to a larger center and got the application and write really hard to get through three layers or you can get it printed out so that’s what I did...so I had to write it out in triplicate.

Helen had those papers completed for, “probably three months.” However, due to her lack of affordable transportation to the next largest center, Helen found that, “I tried to get to town twice and both times I was sitting at home waiting and my ride fell through...and I was thinking that then it is not meant for me to do this yet”. She found the situation working out when, “a relative that I used to live with she came to town and she phoned me and asked me if I wanted to go to town [with her] and yeah sure, actually I have some custody papers to hand in and I said well right on then I am going to take mine in too”.

Helen found that she had to rely on her own initiative when applying for custody and she said, “well I was just asking all these questions like can we have a court date together so we can travel in this Friday and she [court lady] said, “You guys get them in [court papers] and so I said ok...she gave me my papers and said “these are yours and ...we keep these”. Helen had the relative serve her husband the papers and she heard from him on the phone the next week. Helen cannot afford a lawyer so she must do not only all the leg work herself but also be the one to speak with her husband directly to inform him of court dates and custody issues herself. Helen finds herself in that situation because her husband is homeless at this time and contact is only made when he calls her to speak to his son.

Clover has considered bringing her single parent situation to the courts so she can acquire full legal custody of her young son. However, Clover being the youngest mom, found that the system that was available to her was not what she had hoped for:

...when I was trying to find out if I wanted to take full custody of him, if I wanted to legalize the child support and have it happen without his dad just



refusing ...ummm... I kind of had a hard time finding people to help me with that. I went as far as to go to a larger town to ask around and it just seemed like it was always like, "Just see this web site, like go check out this web site, go look on this web site". It was really impersonal... there was nobody to really say, "Here's the number go talk directly to this person and they can help you". It was like really there [is] so no comfort, you shouldn't have to self-research on the internet, there should be resources in your community and I just felt that those were really lacking...nobody took the time to go into any depth about anything.

Clover felt overwhelmed by her situation and the choices she had to make without the support she felt she needed as she tried to gain custody of her son. She found that she was directed to several people in several agencies but, "they would say there is this worker and that worker but they don't specialize in this area so they more specialize in like family stuff but not in specifically in custody and child support". And so like Helen, Clover found she was expected to do the researching and work herself, "some people directed me to one town and some kind of, sort of, "We are not able to give you legal advice, we can't do that, you need to get a lawyer". In my mind I am like I can't afford it, how is that ever going to work, right? She did try to file papers herself and so she, "went to a court house and they gave me a paper to fill out and file for custody and child support but I started asking the lady [clerk] questions and like I kind of just blurted some personal things and she just went, "No I can't give you any legal advice, you can't tell me things, I am not the person". And so twenty-five year old Clover, unable to navigate the system herself decides, "...and then it was so disheartening and I just kind of let it go and never did get the legal system involved because I didn't have any real direction on how to go about it". Just recently Clover found out about a woman who is an old family friend of her dad's and so her dad said to her, "you know what, talk to her, get it set

up"...and I am going to check out my options tomorrow actually...she is in town actually, and ...yeah I am really excited to see what happens with that".

The last two moms, Denalda and Charlie, have had to deal with the legal system also. Denalda chose to file right away for custody of her son based on the advice of a friend that had gone through a similar situation. She says of the experience that, "...really we could have just signed it and had it over with...I told my lawyer all I wanted was my son and within three months his dad [had] signed away custody and legal guardianship". Denalda retained a lawyer from a larger center ...really expensive and a real 'asshole' but he was really good at what he did". So Denalda was able to get what she really wanted but not inexpensively, and so after telling her lawyer, "No, all I want is my son that's all I want...I don't want a bunch of material stuff, that's all I want" ... so eighteen thousand dollars later, which was pretty much the payout on the house she had full custody of her son.

Charlie also found herself dealing with a lawyer but not in a custody battle but involved in a medical malpractice lawsuit. Charlie's first operation resulted in a loss of some of her short term memory. She had been told by a second surgeon that the first operation was not performed properly and when it was suggested that she look in to suing her first surgeon Charlie says she felt:

...very touchy because I didn't have the money to back myself to pursue that kind of thing [lawsuit]". My mom contacted a lawyer right away and then none of the TV stations would take it...I am pretty sure that doctor paid the lawyer off because [at first] he said, "Oh yeah, you have a case, blah, blah, blah," and he charged me a bunch of money for faxing, photocopying and time whatever then said, "You don't have a case because it is Alberta medical and BC medical is so different". Charlie just gave up but related that she was 'extremely upset' when

she saw a couple of months ago on the front page of a newspaper, “[where] these girls have a multi-million dollar court case going on because they lost their student loan...I am like really?”.

The only other time Charlie considered her chances with the legal system was when she was on the coast and considered trying to go through family maintenance for more consistent child support. However, she felt the cards would have been stacked against her if she tried because, “well I didn’t want to... you know, now I was a single mom with how many major surgeries at that time and you know I never ever wanted anyone to question me that way so I never pushed”. Charlie worried that her son’s father might be able to use her surgeries against her and take her son especially when he threatened, “If you go through them [the courts] I will just take my son from you”, which at the time Charlie wished that she had known, “that he would have never, ever done that but it [was] a scary, scary thought” at the time.

### **Summary**

The mothers in this study have found the legal system at times to be helpful such as in the case of Denalda’s custody case and unsupportive like in the case of Charlie’s attempt to sue for malpractice. In Anna’s case, the legal system is being used by an experienced lawyer to slow the process of gaining legal custody and child support to a frustrating stand still and also used to punish Anna’s attempts to protect her children. Finally both moms Helen and Clover have been left to their own devices in navigating the legal system themselves as they try to gain custody of their children from fathers that are unhealthy in their addictions. All of these moms have had to deal with the legal system and all have found that it is an expensive, distant and complicated system that can be

overwhelming and stressful especially as they attempt to provide the best for their children.

### **Relationships: The Sunshine in Their Lives**

The topics covered above were areas identified in the literature review in the project proposal before this study was started, but the topic of the joy children bring to single mothers was ever present throughout all of this study's interviews. The love of their sons and the joy they have when spending time with their children is something that all the moms had in common. Not that each mom wasn't aware of their child's weaknesses from forgetfulness to inadequate skating skills but the sheer delight in their sons appears throughout the interviews.

Helen's son is three and half years old and she speaks of him with pride, "because he is just mellow, he is a musician, he loves to play [music] and he loves to dance". Helen receives comfort from her young son when she is not feeling well, "he knows when I am not feeling good and he will come up and hugs and kisses me, you know and if I am crying he will bring me a tissue, "Here mom". She also finds that her little son understands more than she can imagine and that she sometimes just asks him [her son] to give her a sign, "I am really down with signs, you gotta just blurt it right out to me...and just tell me right now and with him he just blurts things out, he just blows me away because he is a thirty year old in a three and a half year olds body, it just blows me away with the things that he says". She laughs and says that her niece "looks into his eyes and says he is an old soul and always says you have the coolest kid, she just can't get over the

way he is...when he is around other people he is just perfect, he is super polite and always just in there trying to do whatever”.

Finally, even her counsellor is enamoured with Helen’s young son and Helen jokes that the reason the counsellor was glad to see her back was, “she just loved seeing my son; it was the only reason why she wanted me to go [to see her] (laughter)...she just holds him and carries him and just keeps watching him...he is so beautiful”. Helen tells her niece that if she had asked her five years ago, “ I would have never seen myself here with a three and a half year old, that was the furthest from my mind, if anything I would be waiting for a grandchild”. But Helen says, “I love where I am [now]” and she clearly loves her son.

Denalda is another mother that adores her son. She says that, “This kid is my whole world” and jokes with her son that, “there’s no second kid I tell him, I made a perfect one the first time that’s why mom didn’t have another one”. Denalda sees that her son is special and comments that, “I am really guarded about who I let into my son’s life...you have to be pretty special to spend time around my son”. Denalda laughs when asked if she is looking to start a new love relationship in her life because she says, “Yeah I think I am happier now than when I was married...I tell people I didn’t find the perfect man so I just made him [my son], he is my perfect little man, he is my partner”. Finally Denalda feels, “I was meant to have that kid, he saved me like, he made me happy, like he tries my patience at times, every mother gets mad at their kid once and a while. If all that stuff hadn’t happened I wouldn’t have him [and] if I had to do it all again to have him I would, I wouldn’t change a thing, I like being a single mom as strange as that sounds”.

Clover, the youngest mother in the study, visibly lights up when she speaks about her son. She explains that she wrote about her experience while she was expecting and said, “I started writing a song for my son when I was pregnant and finished it after he was born. The last line says, “In my soul you are cocooned until you are born. You brought the beauty out in me and I am forever transformed”. Clover felt that her son allowed her to show the world, “the most beautiful part of me which is him”. She goes on further to say that, “My son gives my life a special meaning, the greatest purpose of all he calls me mommy that the good thing about being a single mom is you get to make all the healthy choices [for him]. Clover delights in the artistic beginnings she sees in her little boy, “learning about art and music in the world, my son actually had his own guitar but the little rock star he is, he smashed it...he is too little to smash mommy’s big guitar so he enjoys playing it as well as my piano or any instruments around him”. She also delights in just the very existence of her son and felt, “like as soon as he was born, like everything was wonderful, just like so full of hope and light...then you see your child and think how can you not be happy and how can you not just smile and think you are the coolest thing in the world?”. And even though Clover has been able to express her thoughts in her song writing she says:

“I always feel my words are not enough, I know I am better at articulating through writing than through speaking but I just want to show... but I guess when people see you interact with your child showing this love I have inside me and I am going to love and nurture and teach and take care of him, because of him he has brought out all these beautiful things out in me and every mother, if that’s how you feel, if that’s how you take your situation as a [single]mother, there is positive sides to that...it has really forced me to push myself”.

Finally, Clover comments on how her son has saved her and she says:

...and now I am going to get emotional but this one thing in my life where I have purpose...it's so beautiful but you might not be religious but I thank God every day for my son because I don't know where I would be honestly, I could be dead now...I know I would be in a really dark place, not happy and now I am...I have such a special bond with my son.

Charlie also feels that special bond with her teenage son. She finds that her son is, "Yeah, he is probably one of my biggest supporters". And even when Charlie finds that her memory loss is affecting her son's daily life, he just manages his frustration in the situation with an, 'Oh mom' because as Charlie says, " my son has such an amazing heart that he always thinks of everyone before himself...like he would never, because he would feel too bad for me, because he knows I feel bad when I forget things so I think he would even feel worse for me that he has given me a hard time for it". Charlie finds that the two of them just 'get through it' and her son helps her to remember and:

...always says I will text you in the morning or something because he has been asking for light bulbs and now I remember it now to tell you but...but he hasn't had any light in his room for a couple of days but I am working and forget to pick them up (laughter) ...but like he is so wonderful to me whenever I don't have the lights.

Charlie appeared to glow with pride as she spoke about one of her son's accomplishments, "Oh he is amazing, like he really is, he won a community award several years ago and she continues, "He is amazing like, oh he is wonderful, he really is, I am so lucky." Charlie is also pleased that her son has avoided some of the typical 'sins' of teenagers, " like I said my son is in grade nine and the things I had done by that time, I am so thankful that my son has never been drunk, he has never smoked a cigarette...my son is very into fitness right now.

Finally Anna's love for her two boys came through her strong desire to keep them safe and to give them the best life she can, "but I mean there are some great people and are really great with my kids, like my kids are doing really well, so for me that's... (she chokes up) [everything] yes especially in the last few months how much they have changed; it was better right off the bat". Anna also had to be harsh and say to her young children, "You guys have to wear your seatbelts, son you are responsible for your little brother" and she says, "I am having conversations with my children, it is really tough to make sure they protect themselves".

### **Summary**

Each single mom spoke about the love she had for her children and how much those children meant to her. They demonstrated their love in many different ways from amazement and wonder to guarding and protecting; each mom expressing great love and care for their young sons. Some moms even felt that their happiness and well-being could be solely attributed to the arrival of their children. And each mom experienced joy at the well-being of their boys; their children truly brought 'sunshine' into their lives.



## **Chapter 5: Recommendations for Support**

The five lone mothers in this study presented narratives which exhibited numerous situations where the single mothers wanted or needed support that was not available to them. Each mother expressed amazement, confusion and usually most often frustration when attempting to navigate common single parent situations. These moms were frequently surprised and baffled by the complex and perplexing systems they experienced. Each mother has struggled to work within the systems already in place for their support such as social and legal services. However, these single mothers want social and community support, access to informed and supportive direction and available financial resources to help them provide for their young children.

All the mothers spoke of the confusion, lack of knowledge and understanding, mental health issues and financial concerns that surrounded them as they found themselves entering single motherhood. A benefit to new single mothers may be a resource group of experienced single mothers from which to consult and seek advice. Denalda said that another single mother that lived in a small town gave her the two best pieces of advice ever as she became a single mother, “every instinct in your body is going to say go off [in public] but don’t because it is going to make it harder on your kids...and get custody right away and get those papers signed”. Although this mom now gives advice when consulted, having an identified and established group of single mom consultants could be a support to new single mothers.

One of the areas identified by all of the single mothers as the most confusing and least accessible was the legal system. All the single mothers in this study did not have the

financial means to attain competent legal representation. Several mothers were forced by their circumstances to try to navigate their way through the legal system with little or no support. Nevertheless, Clover our youngest mother, finally found a worker who provides support for filling out court papers, accessing legal aid and attending court sessions without charge. This worker is also available to single moms to provide income assistance, low income housing, budgeting, life skills and many other supports. However, since Clover has lived her whole life in the same small town and she was unaware of this free service perhaps what would be most helpful is a notice in the local free press, a poster or an informational workshop for both new and experienced single mothers in order to acquire pertinent information.

The other most difficult roadblock for single mothers is the lack of financial funding. Each mother spoke of the challenging aspect of obtaining enough funds to navigate daily living expenses, legal costs and mental health support. The hope of this study would be that community decision makers and resource workers, having read this paper would be better able to address the lack of financial means of single mothers through supportive programs designed specifically to address single motherhood issues. Lone parent Anna spoke about her counsellor who bases her fees on the income of her clients and Denalda talked about how helpful it would be if the gym had fee reductions for not only teens and seniors but also single or lower income mothers.

Finally, all the mothers in this study were asked if they would be interested in coming together with other single mothers and their children in a social or informational setting with a facilitator. All the mothers, without exception, thought they would like to visit and socialize with other single moms. One of the moms, Charlie, had attended a young

mothers' group in another community many years ago and said she really enjoyed, "talking with the other moms and making a photograph booklet" which she still treasures today. One mom expressed that she would want it to be informal and then she would decide if she wanted to continue after she had met the other mothers. Another mother suggested it would be nice to have a community support group for single mothers that provided transportation, child care and the opportunity to connect with other lone moms.

Finally, it is my hope that the stories in this study will provide insights into the lives of single mothers and that their experiences and perceptions will be used to encourage an awareness of the assistance and support needed by many single moms living in small rural communities especially here in the north.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Information Letter



You are invited to participate in a study entitled *Single Mothers Living in a Small Northern Community: Their Stories and Their Experiences*. The research is being carried out by Karyn Pate, a regional graduate student in the Counseling Program at UNBC for her project under the direction of her supervisor, Dr. Linda O'Neill through the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC).

#### Why is this research being done?

The reason for this research project is to better understand women's experiences living as single mothers with children under the age of eighteen in Northern British Columbia. I am interested in learning about the challenges and the rewards of living in a small northern community. How have these challenges affected their lives? How have the rewards enriched their lives? What improvements could be made to advance single mother's lives within their small community? What community supports should be made available to single mothers?

#### Why was I chosen?

You are being asked to participate in this study because:

- You are 19 year of age or older
- You are a single mother
- You currently have children under the age of eighteen.
- You have lived for more than a year in a small Northern community
- You are willing to share your experiences as a single mother
- You are willing to participate in the research process

#### What is involved?

If you agree to voluntarily take part in the study, you will be asked to:

- Take part in a private one-on-one interview that will last about an hour. You will be asked to share your story as a single mother and discuss the challenges and the rewards you have experienced. You will also be asked to consider what supports or programs the community could have offered that would have helped to improve or enrich your situation. You may turn off the digital recorder at any time. The interview can be terminated at your request and all data will be destroyed at your request.

- After the interviews have been analyzed, you will be asked to help check the results. This will involve a short interview lasting about 30 minutes. You will be able to add any information and let the researcher know if the results are accurate.

### **What are the benefits and risks involved in taking part in the study?**

One potential benefit of participating in this research is you may feel rewarded by discussing your experiences as a single mother. You may feel satisfied in knowing that you are contributing to research and providing knowledge to the community regarding single mothers. A potential risk is that it may be uncomfortable talking about your experiences as a single mom. You will be provided with a list of community resources which you can access to get additional support if you would like it. As a member of the community, I do part-time work as a counselor and as a teacher-on-call for an elementary school in the community, but for this project I am approaching potential participants solely in my role as a graduate student researcher. You have the option of withdrawing from the study and not having your data used in the research project if you are uncomfortable with my multiple community roles.

You can refuse to answer any questions and you may stop the interviews at any time. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw from the study during the interview, the tape recordings or after the final interview and any information you have provided will be destroyed.

### **How will my identity be protected? (Anonymity)**

Your interview will be transcribed (typed word by word) by the researcher. Transcripts will be only identified by a code number and pseudonym. Your true identity and name will only be known by the researcher. Any information that might identify you will be removed from the final research document. Although I will do everything in my power to maintain confidentiality, the small number of participants in a small community means that anonymity and confidentiality cannot be fully assured.

### **How will my information be kept private? (Confidentiality)**

Everything you discuss during the interviews as well as the forms you fill out will be kept confidential. This means that your information will not be shared with others. Only my supervisor and myself will have access to the information. Your information and tapes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for 5 years after the project is completed and then will be destroyed. Hardcopies will be shredded and electronic data will be erased from the hard drive.

Although your information will be kept confidential, there will be a general analysis written into the final project report. Communities will not be identified in the final project report.



**How will I be compensated?**

As a way to show my appreciation for your time and effort, you will be given a gift certificate for \$50 at the IGA Grocery Store in Chetwynd. You will not be penalized if you decide to withdraw from the study and will still receive the gift certificate.

**What will be done with the results?**

The completed research will be presented to my supervisor and a project committee of two members at UNBC. It is anticipated that the results may be presented to interested community organizations and /or professionals and may be published as a journal article.

You can obtain a copy of the research results by contacting the researcher, Karyn Pate (250) 401-1137 (cell phone) or [pate@unbc.ca](mailto:pate@unbc.ca), or Dr. Linda O'Neill at 250-960-6414 or [loneill@unbc.ca](mailto:loneill@unbc.ca).

**How will the information be destroyed?**

Data from the study will be destroyed 5 years after completion of the project. Hardcopies will be shredded and electronic data will be erased from the hard drive.

**Who should I contact if I have more questions?**

You will receive a copy of the Information Letter/Consent form to keep for your own records. Please feel free to contact the researcher, Karyn Pate (250) 401-1137 (cell phone) or [pate@unbc.ca](mailto:pate@unbc.ca) or Dr. Linda O'Neill at 250-960-6414 or [loneill@unbc.ca](mailto:loneill@unbc.ca). if you have any questions. Any concerns about the project should be directed to the Office of Research at the University of Northern British Columbia (250) 960-6735 or by email: [reb@unbc.ca](mailto:reb@unbc.ca).



## Appendix B: Research Participant Consent Form

### Research Participant Consent Form

Yes No

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?		
Have you read and received a copy of the participant information letter?		
Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate or withdraw from the research study at any time?		
Do you understand the benefits and risks of participating in this research study?		
Do you understand that the interview will be audio recorded?		
Do you understand that some of the actual words may be published in written form?		
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you?		
Do you know what community resources are available for additional support?		
Do you understand who will have access to the information you provide?		
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study?		

This study was explained to me by: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name of Research Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to participate in this research study:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix C: Poster**

*Single Mothers Living in a Small Northern Community:  
Their Stories and Their Experiences*

- Are you 19 years of age or older?
- Are you a single mother?
- Have you lived in a small Northern community for over a year?
- Do you have children under the age of eighteen currently residing with you?
- Are you willing to share your experiences as a single mother for research purposes?

If you would like to volunteer to share your experiences, both the challenges and rewards of being a single mother in a small community in Northern British Columbia, then I would like to hear from you. I am a UNBC graduate student and this project is for my graduate research at UNBC.

**Your participation would include:**

- A private audio-taped interview
- One check-in
- Compensation for your time and effort

**For Further information please contact:  
Karyn Pate (250) 401-1137 (cell phone)  
or [pate@unbc.ca](mailto:pate@unbc.ca)**